STREET AND SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

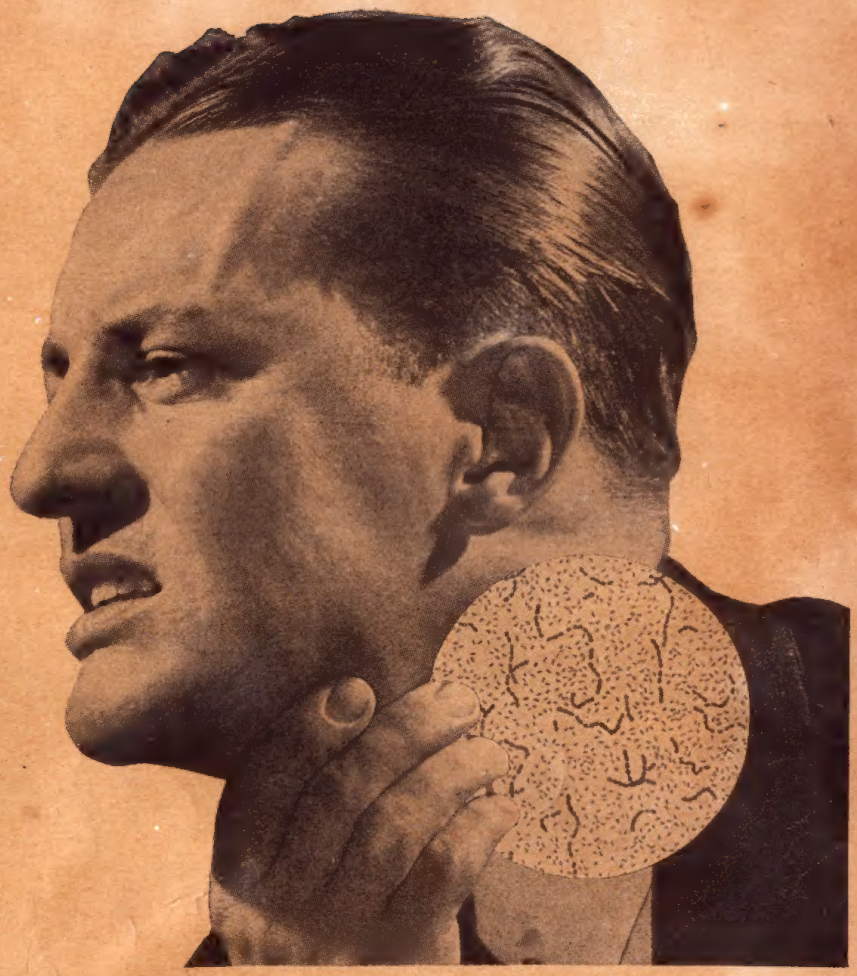
10¢
JAN. 6
1940
JAN. 6, '40

INDIAN COUNTRY

A Book Length Novel

by Tom Roan

Better start gargling with Listerine, Mister!



WHEN you've got the sniffles, a chill, and your throat feels irritated, it's a sign that germs are probably at work in mouth and throat.

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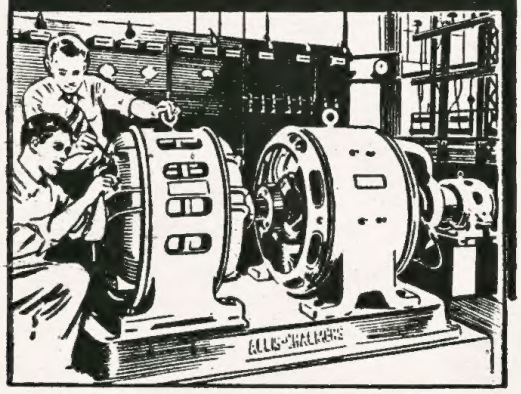

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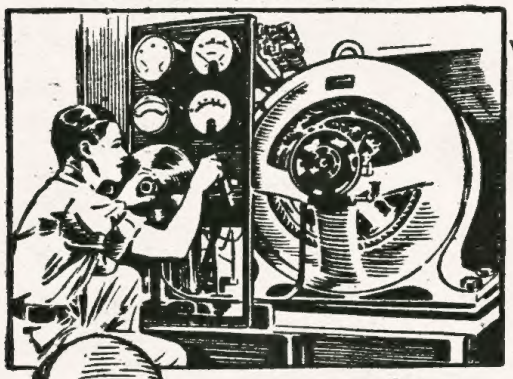

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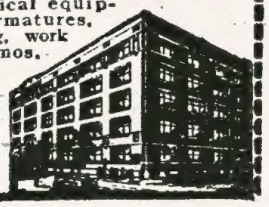

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STREET & SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

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CONTENTS FOR JANUARY 6, 1940 VOL. CLXXIX NO. 3

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COVER BY EDWARD STEVENSON

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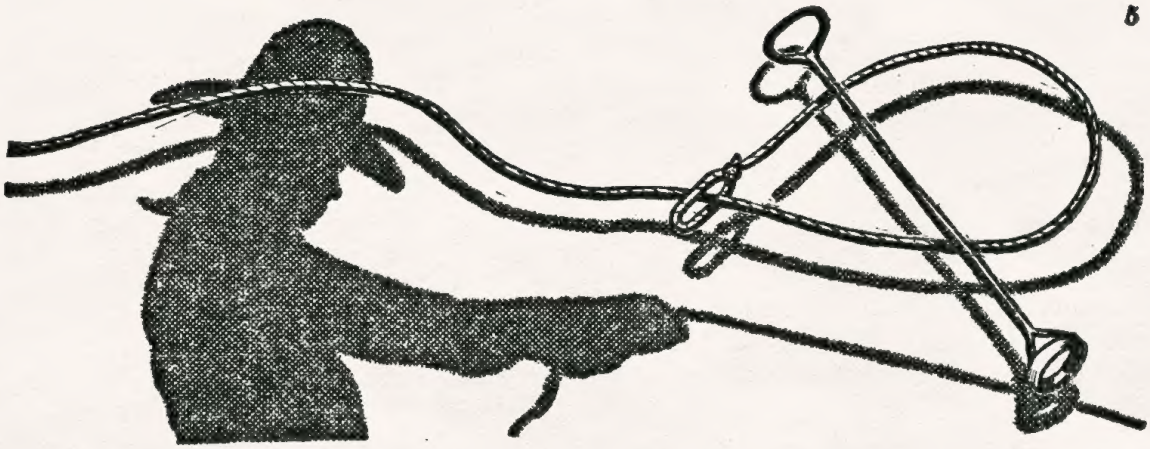

The Roundup

We've received so many enthusiastic letters about the stories of Harry F. Olmsted, whose WARRIORS OF THE STEEL TRAILS we featured in last week's issue, that we thought you'd like to know something about this writing hombre who ranks tops in our tally book of famous authors. So we got in touch with Harry F. and asked him to "tell all." The result is the letter printed herewith, addressed to the Readers of The Roundup.

"The ramrod of Western Story Magazine has asked me to drag my carcass out of the brush so you all can glass up my brand and earmarks. I better do it, too, or he'll likely cut me into the canners, along with the rest of the culls.

"I was born in California, right beside the Old Butterfield Stage Line that carried the shorthorns west to outsmart the *Californianos*. My daddy came West locating the trail for the steel rails and stayed on to play his full part in the development of the Golden State until his death, last January—age eighty-one.

"As a button, I hung around schoolhouses until the geese started north, then I dusted out with my dad to hold the rod, drag the chain an' measure water on engineering projects. At nine, I was drawing down a dollar a day and beans for Uncle Sam and spending my spare time with cowboys, prospectors, Mexicans and Injuns. Cantered through high school thataway, then hibernated through four years of college, graduating as a civil engineer.

"Hiked for the desert then and hung out my shingle. Starvation ain't half bad when you've got a red-headed cowgal to share it, but the business of proving two can live as cheap as one, soon became complicated. When the two daughters came along, I proved my point, and doubled it.

"Engineering took me far afield. Learned Arizona and its history, forward and back. Crossed the trails of Blackjack Ketchum, Butch Cassidy, Geronimo, Wyatt Earp and King Woolsey. Retraced the events of the Tonto Basin War while construction engineer on the Roosevelt Dam. Served as consultant for those amazing Mormons, thrilling to their indomitable fight to tame a wilderness. Surveyed the mines, the irrigated farms and the great cattle ranches. Learned to know the heartbeat of the great West.

"Dragging my picket pin, I drifted into New Mexico, Texas, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, Washington, Oregon and Nevada, soaking up the

things men read about, but never once suspicioning I would write. Probed into the life of that little misanthropist, Billy the Kid. Collected unsynchronized material involving those amazing human coyotes, the Wild Bunch. Stuffed my subconscious files with yarns about lawman and outlaw, cowboy and Indian, feuds, range wars and the westward march of an empire. Then circumstances brought me back to California, with the incurable itch to express the things that had become a part of me. That was in 1921.

"The laughter and scorn of friends withered my sensitive soul and I held back my maiden effort until 1927. In 1928 I sold my first two stories. Since then I have written and sold a thousand yarns—more than six million words of Western fiction, not to mention Central America, South Seas and African adventure yarns for an occasional change of diet.

"The first quivers of the earthquake that sent a nation tumbling into depression left me out of work. But it is an ill wind, indeed, that blows no one good. For one thing, at least, I can thank the depression. It shoved me helter skelter, into the most enjoyable, the most abominable, the most fascinating and goat-getting business in the world, the fiction business. May I never fail to be as good to it as it has been to me and mine. Adios, folks—and *vaya con Dios!*"

Among Walt Coburn's plans for the winter are, he writes us, a little pasear south of the border to visit an old friend who, Walt informs us, raises the best cattle in Sonora. "He's a half brother of one of the ex-presidents of Mexico," writes Walt, "a soft-spoken, polite little feller with a swell sense of humor and plenty of guts. I like to listen to him spin yarns about the days when he and his brothers were getting pushed around by the various rebels and the Federals. The story of his being held for ransom is, in itself, a classic." We sure hope W. C. is going to enjoy this jaunt down below the Rio Grande, and we hope, too, there'll be some more of his exciting and colorful stories of the border "comin' up!"

In next week's big issue—

It isn't very often that we can corral a story as interesting and unusual as the serial which begins in our next issue—a five-part job by Seth Ranger, who's turned out many a fine tale for us. HARD-ROCK MEN is the tensely dramatic story of the men who live the most important part of their lives hundreds of feet beneath the earth's surface, probing for its hidden riches. When you get your copy of W. S. next week, turn to the first installment of this absorbing serial and take a trip to the Old Glory, the mine that was dug under the very floor of the ocean. It'll be a trip you'll never forget, and we'll wager you'll want a "through" ticket.

Another outstanding story we have lined up, is SIDEWINDER'S SMOKE SCREEN, by Wayne D. Overholser. This thrill-packed tale of the conflict that arose between a band of hot-tempered cowmen and a logger whose carelessness led to a forest fire that devastated a range, literally crackles with blazing action.

E. C. Lincoln, Walt Colburn, Frank Richardson Pierce, Paul Ellsworth Triem and W. D. Hoffman also are represented in next week's big issue.

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The **AVENGER**

10 CENTS—EVERYWHERE

INDIAN COUNTRY

BY TOM ROAN

CHAPTER I

THE FEUD

A WHISPERY rain drooled from the sullen summer sky as Mississippi Frank Green's wheel-locked wagon train stood on the eastern bank of the Ruby. The night was like a thick black fog. It shut out everything but the drip of the rain on the canvas-covered wagons and the murmuring noise of the swollen river

seething down out of the dark hills in its deep, rock-walled gorge. For long intervals there was no other noise. There was only that deep, dark silence of hopeless desperation broken now and then by a low groan from the wounded and a last sigh of the dying.

Not a shot had been fired for hours, but it was the third night of a three-day stand in the hostile Indian country deep in the great hills of Montana Territory. Bible-shouting Mississippi Frank Green's overland train was hard hit. Eighty-odd huge old wagons out of an original one hundred and twenty-two of the great train were yet reasonably intact in the half-circled train. How long they could remain intact with more than three hundred Sioux and Cheyennes surrounding the train was a question no man could answer.

It had been disaster from the beginning. Eleven of the wagons, along with their drivers and half their families of settlers, to say nothing of their teams and yokes of cattle, had gone to terrified wreck and ruin in the first ten minutes of the fight. The charred and rain-soaked shapes of the lumbering vehicles still lay among the bodies of the smoke-blackened dead on the rise of hills to southward where they had been trapped by the red men's first unexpected charge before the long train could reach the river and the shelter of the tall rocks and trees along its high-walled bank.

"Fate Odin's out there in that darkness with those red devils. You can't convince me of anything else. I've warned you all along, Mr. Green, that we should have hanged the devil and his bloodthirsty crew instead of merely expelling him and his twelve wagons from the train."

THE speaker glanced bitterly across the fire at the two long, lean-faced older men. He was a tall man somewhere in his early thirties. The rain and incessant slop under his booted and spurred feet had dampened some of the fine-aired gentleman about him. His huge white hat was no longer white. The rain had blackened it and warped its broad brim with its gold-leafed band around the crown. His great blue cape with its flashing red sateen lining was bedraggled. The cloak clung to his broad shoulders in a sloppy shroud and flapped about his long legs untidily. He stood with a tin cup of hot tea in hand and near the only sign of fire in the center of the roped-off arena among the horses, mules and cattle inside the half-circled wagons.

"I still ain't agreein' with yuh, Captain Jackson, smart as yuh may be, bein' a lawyer man an' a soldier —an' all of that." It was old Ben Dwight who answered. A plainsman of the old school, dressed in fringed and soiled yellow buckskins, with a long bowie in his heavy revolver belts, Dwight turned his head to the left and looked at the rain-soaked figure of Mississippi Frank Green beside him. "Fate ain't the man yuh an' Frank think he is, even if yuh and an' a heap of others in the train don't like 'im—an' never did for some reason right from the start."

"We won't go into that, Ben!" Green arose quickly, a man easily moved to wrath. "What Captain Jackson thinks or says about that renegade is of no particular concern of the moment. We are trapped here. More than one hundred women and children are looking to us for their very lives, and the Indians are all around us. More seem to be joining them, and by all our

careful reckoning we're eighty miles from the headwaters of Little Wolf Creek where soldiers could be found if we could get a man through to them. Three brave men have tried it. Their cries and the sounds of the shots told us they were captured and killed before they had gone a hundred yards beyond our lines. What we want now is no more quarreling—"

"And more organized fighting, gentlemen!"

The voice of a fourth man, coming with such unruffled simplicity there behind Captain Buster Jackson, was startling. The newcomer stepped calmly forward, moving on moccasined feet and as noiselessly as an Indian. He was a large man, almost burly in his build. His hair was long and yellow, and he wore the garb of a plainsman. Heavy six-shooters hung in his belts, a rifle rested in the crook of his left arm, and a dangerous-looking bowie with a ten-inch blade swung in a beaded scabbard on his broad chest, held there by a silver chain around his neck. He had a youthful look in spite of his thirty years and the scar of an old saber wound in his right cheek.

"You!" It was Captain Jackson who dropped his cup with a gasp and wheeled to stare at the man. "*Fate Odin!*"

"You're surprised, Jackson?" The newcomer bowed and smiled, but there were wicked little lights of dancing blue steel in his eyes. "The last time we parted, I made you the promise that we would some day meet again and get everything off our chests. We meet, but our chests will have to continue with their loads. This is no time for bloodshed between whites, even if I do find that you handle my name quite recklessly. It's rather nice to know I'm not completely forgotten."

"Nary a night ner day have yuh been forgot by me, Fate!" Old Ben Dwight stepped forward, thrusting out his hand. "Shake! All the folks in this train ain't yore enemies in spite of the Right an' Wrong Committee throwin' yuh out o' the train."

THE long minute of silence that followed was a dangerous one. Memories between them were strong. They were memories that had much to do concerning many bloody fights on the back trail when quarrels soared beyond words and were settled with old-fashioned fist-and-skull battles—and sometimes the dripping knife and the blazing gun. There had been much of that since the wagon train left St. Joe many weary weeks before—and until Fate Odin had been banished from the train just twelve days before Indians struck above the Ruby. From the beginning certain stiff-necked men in the train had not liked Fate Odin and his rowdy thirty-man crew of bull-skinners, buffalo hunters, plainsmen and Indian scouts.

There were men and women from almost every State east of St. Joe, but Frank Green's wagon train boasted mostly of peace-loving men and women from the inlands of the lower Mississippi. Even the Civil War had left half of them without its curse that had fallen so hard upon the rest of the land. Some had never been close enough to a battlefield to hear a cannon roar. Many of them were hide-outs from the war who had taken to the swamps and hills to escape the mustering of the able-bodied men for the front. "Swamp Rabbits" they were sometimes called, and the epithet was not a flattering one.

"And how," Frank Green was finally finding his voice again, "did you get into camp?"

"As easily as walking into a barn with both doors open," answered Odin. "I floated down the river on a log covered with brush just in case there happened to be a little light breaking from the sky. The reds could do the same if they were not commanded by Little Chief Crying Child. He was always a fool, but Standing Wolf is joining him before daylight, and you'll have a first-class fighting man to deal with."

"You seem to know a lot about Indians!" There was an open taunt in Buster Jackson's voice.

"I make it a point to know." Odin looked at the man, his eyes measuring him up and down. "My wagons are twelve miles west of you. If you had followed my suggestions before your damned Right and Wrong Committee forced me out of the train, you would have never found yourselves in this trap. You work fast when you work, Jackson, but you don't work very well."

"There's to be no quarrel!" Green held up his right hand quickly. "You were sent away from the train, it's true, Odin, and now you're back, but only for a brief stay, of course. You said something about the worst coming—"

"I sent one of my best men for the troops who were stationed at the headwaters of the Little Wolf," cut in Odin soberly. "He found that there were no soldiers there."

"And if your camp's so far away from us," Buster Jackson's eyes narrowed, "how did you happen to know we were in trouble, Odin?"

"As I said, I make it a point to know." Again Odin looked the man up and down, measuring him. "That's the only way you get through this country these days when the Sioux and the Cheyennes are running wild."

"Very nice of you to enlighten us, I'm sure!" Jackson shrugged. "Very nice, also, if you've really sent for help. There has been a rumor in the train that you and the reds, especially the Cheyennes, are quite chummy."

"Only you never heard a man say that to my teeth, Jackson." There were fighting lights in Odin's eyes now. "And yet," he suddenly laughed, "it is true. I have friends among both the Cheyennes and the Sioux. Just now there seems to be a sort of a let-down. My men are outnumbered a dozen to one and fighting both Sioux and Cheyennes from behind the abandoned adobe walls of old Fort Cache on Whispering Water Creek. So far, we've just about been holding our own. You can look out for an attack just before dawn, Mr. Green. It's in the making. I know. I slipped into Chief Crying Child's camp and came out of it only an hour ago. I heard it being planned. They will jump you this time from directly across the river. That will be before dawn. The idea is to try to make you throw all your fighting men to this side of the train, and then they'll jump you from the other. I thought you'd probably be interested."

"The story would be far more interesting had it come from the lips of a gentleman instead of the mouth of a renegade Rebel cavalryman!"

A fifth speaker was coming forward, and behind her others were taking shape in the darkness. She was a tall, dark-haired girl with a rifle in the crook of her arm, and she was beautiful in spite of the glistening rain on her old-fashioned black bonnet and the long black cloak reaching almost to the mud at her heels.

"Good evening, Miss Green." Odin touched the brim of his hat and bowed, but again those cold, wicked blue lights twinkled in his eyes. "I see that the kitten still has long claws."

"What's that, Odin!" Captain Jackson was like a tiger suddenly turning upon him with blazing eyes. "You insulting Confederate rake!"

It was the blazing match to the powder. Fate Odin's big right fist belted forward. It was like a hammer. It swung straight to the captain's mouth, smashed into it with all the weight of Odin's hundred and eighty pounds behind it. Jackson buckled forward, the teeth and blood flying as he landed flat on his face in the mud and water like a suddenly felled ox.

"The Committee! *The Committee!*" Mississippi Frank Green's sudden outcry was like a scream going to every wagon in the train. "Come here! *Gather!* The devil himself has come back to the train!"

"Somebody bring a rope!" another voice howled. "Fate Odin's back! *Fate Odin's inside the train!*"

CHAPTER II

FIRE !

STAND yore ground, plainsman!" Old Ben Dwight was quick enough about it. He stepped forward, and wheeled behind Odin. Even as he was moving forward he unholstered his guns, and was suddenly standing with his back to Odin's. "I've cussed myself ever' day for not leaving this outfit when yuh pulled out, an' now if this fool mob of self-righteous windbags wants a fight with yuh, they'll have to have one with me, too!"

"Take it easy, Ben," Odin said calmly. There was no fear in his eyes. It was not his first foolhardy quarrel with these people. "If Chief Crying Child could step in on this show right now, there would not be a white left alive in thirty minutes. Stand back, you fools!"

For men were surging forward. Fighting lines under the wagons were foolishly being deserted. At any moment a terrible disaster could happen here. Indians were certainly watching everything from out there in the darkness. If a rush came now, it would be a wholesale massacre.

"Get back to your places, hide-outs!" It was the worst thing Odin could have called them. Each one knew the meaning of hide-out. It was the brand of a coward to every man. "Are you fools enough to think I'll stand here and have your Right and Wrong Committee manhandle me just because I knocked that blackguard down? Well, he's not unconscious now, but he's too much of a damned rat to get on his feet and fight! He started it, and all because of the excuse I gave him when I said the kitten had long claws." He looked straight at Ann Green. "I'll change that. The damned cat does have long claws, and she's a weak-brained fool along with it!"

He was fighting mad now, and he was talking to them in a strong tongue they could not fail to understand. This crowd had to be bullied. It was the only way to knock sense into the brains of the hard-headed fools of the mob. He had taken his life into his hand dozens of times to reach this sorely helpless wagon train. Not for half the men in it would he have even troubled himself, but there were women and children here, the innocents in the hands of a few fools who called themselves leaders in a lawless region of which they knew little or nothing. As he had fought for them all the way

across the plains, he was trying to fight for them now—whether they would have it or not!

For strange things had dogged Mississippi Frank Green's wagon train. A mysterious fever had raged through it when they were in the

midst of the plains and far out in hostile territory. It was a fever that burned the life out of its victims in a few hours, and the ironical part of it had been that the three doctors coming west with the train had been the first to die. And there had been quarrels and fights. Wagons had mysteriously disappeared from the train in the dangerous country. Scouts sent out on Odin's own responsibility had followed them. Indians had driven them back or the charred remains of wagons had been found, looted of course and their drivers missing.

Only a fool would not have known that some clique in that great train was working with the Indians. The signs were too plain, and the suspicions had grown. It had finally been turned upon Odin and his men, and the opinion of the crowd, once swung in that direction, could not be changed. His expulsion from the train had followed.

The blink of an eye could bring murder now. Odin was prepared for it, and saw it staring at him, but he saw something else at the same time. He saw two former Civil War soldiers shake back their shoulders and detach themselves from the mob. They came forward, and two others joined them. The first to reach Odin turned, taking a stand grimly beside him.

"Somethin' tells us to sort o' back yore play tonight, Odin," growled the man, a towering, red-bearded giant of a fellow called Bender Love who had always half-sided with Odin during the quarrels across the plains. "I ain't yet been plumb satisfied 'bout havin' to see yuh an' yore men get yore walkin' orders to pull out of the train."

"And the rest of you have *got* to listen to something!" Odin was again speaking to the crowd. "You're surrounded here. I've been out scouting. I've been in Chief Crying Child's camp north of you. I killed one of his men to get in there. Killed him and took his war bonnet, and slipped in. Crying Child is getting reinforcements. Standing Wolf is joining him. The name of Standing Wolf may mean nothing to the most of you, but it means lots to a plainsman. Before dawn there'll be an attack here. When it comes you must be ready. That means you've got to listen to me. That means—"

"Now you wait a minute!" Mississippi Frank Green was suddenly thrusting himself forward as four men came up to lift Captain Jackson from the mud and carry him away. "I'm still the captain of this wagon train. You've been proven unwanted among us, Odin. You've been kicked out of the train and ordered never to return, but you're here. You've insulted my daughter. You've assaulted a gentlemen in front of my very nose. I—"

A STREAK of light cut him off. It was a streak that came speeding through the gloom from the opposite side of the river, a blazing shaft that crossed over the point of Odin's left shoulder, sped on quicker

than an eye could follow it, and buried itself high in Mississippi Frank Green's right arm.

It was a flaming Indian arrow. For one terrible moment it hung there in the man's arm, the blaze hissing, and then Green was jerking it away with the blood flying as men started yelling and women screaming, their voices half-drowning out the savage screeching and the wild barking of rifles on the western bank of the river.

"Back to your places!" thundered Odin, leaping forward and snuffing out the burning arrow in the mud and water as other burning arrows started falling among the wagons. "Look out for the main charge from the east! *This is the trick! Back to your places, every man!*"

It was just as Fate Odin had heard it planned. Everything was coming from the western side of the river. Over there the Sioux and Cheyennes had the advantage of the rocks and trees. The gorge was no more than sixty yards wide. As the rocks protected the whites on the east rim of the gorge, the rocks and trees protected the reds on the western rim. Behind those rocks the Indians lighted their heavy arrows that had been dipped in warm pitch and rolled in black powder and dry bits of grass. It took but little skill to fire them across the river.

But the danger from the arrows was not as great as it seemed. For once Mississippi Frank Green had pitched a good camp. The wagons, being half-circled, were not in immediate danger of being fired. Only those that ended the half-circle were close to the river. Their tops were dripping wet, and there were the rocks to protect the whites while they fought any flames that were started by arrows plunging on through the canvas tops and into the wagons and to the dry materials inside.

"The water's too swift for them to dare a crossing." Odin passed that word through the fighting mobs. "Get the women and children back and out of the way. Keep them there. Twenty men here can watch the arrows and keep up a show of fighting. Use your six-shooters, and fire rapidly to make them think we've got plenty of men on this side. Let the others hold their fire. When the charge from the east comes, they'll throw everything behind it. I think the first charge will be the worst with the reds risking everything to make it a success and take over everything in the rush."

His words as to how they were to fight were sound wisdom. Even those who did not trust him could realize that. This man was a soldier. He knew the fighting frontier and how to meet its dangers. He had crossed the plains many times with his great freighters hauling supplies for posts and towns on the Ruby River, and even bitterly-sworn enemies were glad to depend on him in a fight.

THE Indians were making it desperate enough. They were not merely making noise on the other side of the river. They were shooting to do as much damage as they possibly could, and the flaming arrows were helping them. Here and there the torches of light were shedding their bright glows among the wagons before men could hastily stamp them out in the mud. The size of the arrows had also increased. They were no longer merely arrows dipped and rolled in their flame-giving substance. They were becoming hard-seasoned sticks as long as the ramrods of old-fashioned muzzle-loader rifles of the Daniel Boone

variety. They were heavier and they gave off more flame. For a little while Fate Odin was puzzled by them, but it was not for long.

"They're using muzzle-loader shotguns over there," he told Ben Dwight while they kept the heavier lines of settlers under the wagons and facing the east and left the business of returning the fire across the river to the twenty men concealed in the rocks. "They're ramming these sticks down on charges of powder and are blazing away at us. The shotguns are like cannons throwing bombshells among us. That's no Indian trick, Ben," he lowered his voice and glance cautiously around him. "I heard things tonight when I crept up on Chief Crying Child's lodge up the river." He glanced around again, and dropped his voice to an even lower pitch. "How much coined gold and silver would you think there is in this wagon train?"

"Danged if I know, Fate." Dwight looked at him curiously in the light of another long, blazing shaft that came hissing and sputtering through the trees to drop at the edge of a pool of water two rods away. "I've never give it much thought. I reckon there's some, maybe considerable, but bringing gold out here in big amounts ain't much like settlers. They usually go for buyin' up ever'thing they can back East, an' bringin' supplies to last 'em for two or three years."

"Maybe the wagons brought both supplies and money," whispered Odin. "At any rate, I heard gold and silver mentioned tonight, and if the reds know about it, you can be certain that some white has told them. All of which," he smiled wearily, "lifts that finger of suspicion again. This time, though, it may not point so directly at me."

"Somebody just made it point at you, like I've always said," Ben declared. "Somethin' tells me that somebody got kind o' scared as far back as St. Joe when they found out that you and your big freighters were going to trail with this outfit. Your rep for gettin' at the bottom of things is what you might call established. Then there's them wagons what disappeared so reg'lar. This one droppin' behind, and that one— Dammit!" He slapped his hand to his right cheek as a glancing bullet coming through the rocks and trees burned his face. "Them bullets are gettin' too close for comfort! How long do yuh think it'll be before the big charge comes?"

"It's coming now!" Odin looked quickly toward the wall of wagons east of them. "Get ready everybody!"

The running hoofs could already be heard. It was a low, rolling and drumming sound. All along the line of men under the wagons, the settlers were cautioning each other to hold their fire. Not yet had the usual Indian yells lifted, but they were not long in coming. When they came it was like the mad trumpeting of a great herd of wild animals stampeding with the pound and thunder of racing hoofs beating out a weird rhythm to all the savage wailing.

Now that they had been told how to fight, the settlers knew what to do. Hundreds of fights between whites and reds had never schooled the Indians against their one fatal mistake. They always darted in close on their ponies before opening fire, and it was disaster personified when the first ringing roar of the settlers' guns was turned loose upon them.

The surprise must have been terrific. It was evident that the Indians had not expected to meet such a withering volley. Their hopes were

placed on the trick the rest of the Indians were carrying out with such seeming success from the western side of the river, and yet they tried to brazen it out.

With dead and wounded dropping, ponies going down and tripping others, the charge swept on. It thundered close in to the blazing guns licking flames of fire almost right in their faces. Their own weapons poured a terrible, wild volley into the wagons, and they were completing their mistake by swerving away to the right and left as they finished emptying their rifles while they galloped on in their crazy race to take themselves out of range.

"Beats me how they'll never learn," growled Ben Dwight in Odin's ear when the last beat of hoofs of a wild third charge died away to eastward. "Allus make the same mistake, and it's the same from a Sioux to an Apache."

THE failure of the last charge of the Indians from the east had done something also to the red men in the gloom and rocks on the west side of the river. The shooting from that direction had gradually fallen away into almost a complete, breath-held silence.

"They're puzzled over there," Odin declared. "Can't figure out just what has happened to their little plan. It looks like we have them stood off for the time being. Look at that light brightening in the east, Ben! If we hold 'em when they make their next charge, we'll have the deadwood on them. They'll never charge with a brighter dawn light behind them."

"Just what I'm thinking, Fate." Dwight took a damp slug of tobacco out of his pocket, and wrung off a huge chew of it between his worn snags of yellow-stained teeth. "But what about yore wagons? Yuh gave up a lot, leavin' them to come he'p us, Fate. There's hang-fired few men in this train who would have done the same thing for you in a tight."

"I know that, Ben." Odin was still watching that faint little streak of light gradually drawing its pale high line of gold along to tops of the distant hills. "But you know old Fort Cache. My wagons would be fairly safe with twice as many Indians as my men are fighting. Why, we're behind walls four feet thick. Even my wagons are in the clear in the inner courtyard. Besides all that, my men wanted me to come. There's not a one of them, Ben, that I'd trade for every member of Green's Right and Wrong Committee."

A tall figure came out of the shadows at that moment with a rifle cradled in the crook of his bandaged right arm. It was Mississippi Frank Green. He halted several feet away, and nervously cleared his throat. For a moment it seemed that he was having trouble with his voice. When he did speak, his tone was low, half-guarded and as if he did not care to have his words carried farther than Odin's ears.

"I've got to give credit where it belongs, Mr. Odin," he began lamely. "You told us the truth. I don't know why you slipped back through all the danger to try to help us after"—there was an awkward pause as he cleared his throat again, —"well, after the way we turned you out of the train. I speak for everybody in the train, I know, when I say that we thank you from the bottom of our hearts. I might say also that you alone would not have been sent away from the train, but," there was another uncomfortable pause, "you

insisted on taking up for your men, even when they were in the wrong. I hope you understand. I've never wilfully wanted to harm any man, Mr. Odin."

"If you intend an apology, Mr. Green," answered Odin quietly, "it won't be necessary."

"But," Green shook back his shoulders, "I didn't exactly mean to apologize, Mr. Odin. I merely wanted to thank you for the people in my train. It looks like you have completely spoiled a trick on the part of the reds that would have spelled certain disaster to us, and maybe to the last woman and child. If there is another charge, I think we can stand it off. What . . . what I really wanted to say"—there was another one of those awkward pauses—"well, I hope you will forgive me for being blunt about it. You came to us in the darkness, and before that light gets any brighter in the east, I think it would be better for you to leave us. Personally, I'll pray that you get safely through the red lines and back to Fort Cache. I— Look out, Ben! *Don't do that!*"

CHAPTER III

THE MADMAN

ODIN caught Dwight just in time to prevent a sudden calamity. In the years he had known the old frontiersman, Odin had found him an eternally slow man to anger, but once aroused, Dwight could be as dangerous as an aroused mountain lion. He had not said a word all during the time Mississippi Frank Green had been talking. As the man was just finishing, Dwight had merely taken a quick step forward. His right hand had gone to the heavy hilt of bone at his belts. There had been a ripping sound, and the old man's big bowie had jerked like a blade of light into his gnarled hand.

"Don't stop me, Fate!" Dwight's cracked voice urged as Odin hurled him back and stepped quickly between the two men. "Never stop a man from doin' the world a good turn. The long-legged buzzard ain't worth the one little lead bullet it'd take to bust the bridge of his nose wide-open an' blow his brains to hell an' back, but I can cut his throat without cost or hurt to a good knife —an' I can cut it so slick an' quick he'll have to shake 'imself three times 'fore his damned head falls off!"

"Cool yourself, Ben!" Odin planted himself in front of the old man as others started running up, attracted by Dwight's quick, hot words. "This is no time for fighting here among ourselves. Indians still surround this train. Women and children are yet in grave danger. This is a time to be sane!"

"This is a time of mutiny, if you want the straight of it!" Green cried bitterly. "But save your strength. You don't have to hold him off of me, Odin. I am fully capable of taking care of myself, though I am a man who has devoted his life to peace and good will to my fellowmen, and I want no bloodshed."

"But yuh might've expected it, shootin' off yore mouth like yuh did, Mississippi Frank!" Bender Love, a man usually bombastic with friendliness, was suddenly thrusting his way forward in the gathering crowd. "I heard what yuh said from behind my wagon. All I've got to say to it is that yuh oughta practice a little more of what yo're allus preachin', though yore preachin' ain't fooled me. I've crossed the plains seven times haulin' freight and such. I've seen a lot. Too much, maybe, but I'm sayin' here an' now, an' backin'

it with gun or fist, that you're treatin' Mr. Odin worse'n a rattlesnake would treat 'im. If that's what yuh call mutiny, then yuh can count me in, an' all them what don't like it can rear up on their hind laigs to fight or go to hell!"

"I'll expel you and Dwight from the train, just as we expelled Odin and his gang!" cried the preacher, so white-faced at the moment he looked like a man ready to drop dead in his tracks from sudden heart failure. "I'm captain of this train. We made our rules and regulations before we left St. Joe. All who were to have the protection of our large number were to take orders—"

"You mean," cut in Odin, still keeping Dwight behind him, "that your Right and Wrong Committee of old battle-ax women and spineless men drew up those rules, and being a half-way politician like the most of your stripe, you thought you could make everybody follow. But we'll let that ride. You're acting like a plain damned fool, Green. If I know anything about men, you're a self-satisfied old fool. You know nothing about this country. I didn't come to your camp to stay. At the same time, I didn't come to be a suicide by walking right out into Indian lines when only a fool could expect to get through them with dawn already at hand. When it's time for me to go, I'll go, and not before."

He was looking the man straight in the eyes in the faintly growing light.

"Use some sense, Green. You people started for this country to make your homes and your living out here. Getting through the hostile regions is the job that faces you. You still have more than a hundred miles to go before you reach Dead Man Basin, your next town. The country's rough, wild. You may be holding your own against the Indians who jump you, but they're here still, and even if they draw off there's a ten-to-one chance that they'll jump you again. What you need now is all the co-operation you can muster to get through. There are human rats in your train, Mr. Green." Again he looked the preacher straight in the eyes. "Everybody here knows it. But there are good people, also, and all I want is to see you get through."

"Odin, if there was ever a murdering human rat who walked on two legs, you're that rat!"

THE harsh, almost insane voice of Captain Buster Jackson was like an explosion suddenly bursting into the quarrel. The man had torn himself out of the keeping of the men who had been forcing him to stay away from Odin. With a white froth gathered on his swollen and blue-black mouth and appearing like a bull ready to charge, he had come plowing through the crowd. To Odin's surprise, he saw a pair of cavalry sabers clutched in the man's right hand.

"Stand back, all of you, until I have my say!" Jackson hurled aside a group trying to close in on him from the right and left. "And you stand where you are, Odin. You're a damned bully, who can kill with a gun or beat a man's face into a pulp with your brutal fists, but you're a cowardly mongrel when it comes to fighting with a gentleman's weapons. I—"

"Now, Captain Jackson, we will not have this!" roared Mississippi Frank Green, suddenly moving toward the man. "Man, haven't we had enough blood—"

"Keep out of this!" snarled Jackson. "I'm challenging Odin. If he's a man or a half of one he'll fight me

like a gentleman. You've heard what I said, Odin!" His voice rose into a shriek. "You haven't the nerve to take that piece of good old Yankee fighting steel and step out here in the mud with me!" He tossed one of the sabers to the ground in front of Odin's feet. "Take it, damn you, or back away from it like a whipped cur with his tail between his legs!"

"Let me cut his throat, Fate." Old Ben Dwight was trying to push forward again, the big bowie's hilt still tightly gripped in his hand. "I can do it an' give 'im both sabers to boot!"

"Stand clear of it, Ben." Odin pushed the man back. "If I have any friends here, they'll see that the play is fair. Nothing will give me more pleasure, Jackson, than to steel-whip your black face into dog meat." He stooped quickly and snatched up the saber at his feet. "It's a hell of a time for it, but it should have come long before, and as you seem so happy to remind me, I am never a man to shirk the sight of a little blood."

IT was foolhardy, but Fate Odin had seen many foolhardy things come to pass in Mississippi Frank Green's wagon train. Even the light was not strong enough for two men to fight a duel with sabers. Old Ben Dwight called attention to that. He warned them also that they were still surrounded by Indians, and that the quiet might not hold in spite of the slowly growing light in the east. His remarks brought only a sneer from Captain Jackson.

Jackson wanted blood. Any man could have seen that he was hungry for it. There was something in his eyes that told Odin that the former captain was afraid something would happen at the last moment to rob him of his chance to see the red spill. The man was a swordsman. Every man and woman in the train had heard that. His swordsmanship was Jackson's greatest boast.

"The light's as fair for one as the other, you old fool!" he cried, glowering at the crowd. "If Odin's afraid to face me, let him say so and sneak away like a dog without courage enough to fight for his own bone. I've insulted him enough to make any man fight. If he's a coward I can't help it. And he is a coward," his eyes blazed as his swollen mouth hurled out the words to taunt Odin. "I see it in his face. He's a beaten man before he can come forward and take his stand in front of me."

"That's not fear you see, Jackson." There was a strange note of softness in Odin's tone, one that seemed laden with hopeless resignation to the task in front of him. "I've got to fight you. As you said, you've insulted me enough to make any man fight. Out here we can't take it as well as we might in other places. If it went the rounds that a man like you bluffed me, I'd have to kill others to keep them in their place. I kill no man unless I have to kill him, but I fear no man I can look in the eye, and I'm not even remotely afraid of you. I am afraid of myself; I'm afraid of what I'll do before I stop, once you force the issue as you have. I don't really want to kill you this morning. To show you that I'm a better man than you, I intend to give you a sword whipping you won't forget, and some day I'm going to finish the job. This morning I can still see that you might be of some use in helping to get this train on through to Dead Man Basin, but if you do go through with it I'll warrant you that you won't be the handsome, dark-skinned whelp you were when the train pulled out

of St. Joe. Now get up your hand—and *guard!*"

THEY came together like two devil dancers poised on the balls of their toes. A swordsman was in front of Fate Odin. That was certain. The man had been no mere braggart about it. Swordmanship was one thing Captain Buster Jackson knew. On his feet the man was like a feather in a rapidly fish-tailing wind. He was here, he was there, a high parry and a low, a boxer armed with a steel lance instead of a glove. The blades crossed a dozen times in

There were sinister signs that a clique in Mississippi Frank Green's wagon train had sold out to the Indians.

the first half minute of the fighting. They slithered, tapped, rang, showered sparks of fire, and whipped neatly away.

Fate Odin was more like a man hard-pressed. He made several mistakes, and suddenly he saw that Jackson was becoming clownish at times. That was play on the part of Jackson. Even the clownishness of the man could not escape a strange sort of rhythm, a neatness that could not be overlooked. Jackson was out to get his man, to run him through and through. That was plain.

A bullet from the west side of the river whistled between them and frightfully close to Odin's face in the heat of the second minute of the fight. That meant that the light was getting brighter, and Odin swung into it like a Cossack fighting for his life. He crossed blades, ran his steel down Jackson's steel, gave it a violent twist, and leaped clear just in time to avoid an awkward-appearing but decidedly clever back-stroke that would have cut his stomach wide open.

Another novicelike trick of Jackson's! Odin gave the man credit for it. The man had courage, and it was backed with desperate determination to end the fight as quickly as possible. Odin gave ground, took it, and was giving ground again when a second bullet whistled at them from across the river and passed just behind the back of Odin's neck. For nearly a half minute after that, Odin was holding Jackson in place, and it came to him suddenly that Jackson was right in a spot where a bullet from across the river could have dropped him at any instant.

That meant something! In the steadily growing light, the Indians across the river were not actually shooting at Jackson! That meant that they were shooting at Odin. For a moment he saw blood and was about to run Jackson through, but something changed his mind. He, too, became a trickster. He darted back, skidded in the mud, and almost dropped to one knee.

With eyes blazing with sudden opportunity, Jackson was after him. Odin staggered out of the way, parried Jackson's quick blade across his shoulder, and at that instant Jackson slipped in the soft mud underfoot. He plunged on, became really clownish when he all but dropped his sword as he landed on his hands and knees.

The chance belonged to Odin. He could have killed the man on the spot before Jackson could jerk to his feet, whirl, and leap back into the fight. But Odin did not want to kill him.

For the next minute it was lightning play. Suddenly Odin was ending it. He parried a furious blow, ran the tip of his blade down Jackson's, and speared the man through the wrist.

With a screech of rage, Jackson tried to fling clear. Odin's saber was like a hissing snake. It bit through Jackson's guard. There was a rip. The blood spouted, flying from a deep, ragged gash in Jackson's right cheek. He seemed to slip again. Before the wink of an eye his left cheek had been opened to the bone. An instant later Jackson was down, a sobbing and cursing maniac with his right arm split open from the wrist to the elbow and his blade torn out of his hand and splashed away in a puddle of mud and water.

And not to his dying day would Jackson forget the sudden shriek of glee that came from Old Ben Dwight when the man saw that Jackson was helplessly out of the fight.

CHAPTER IV

WAGONS FROM THE WEST

OLD BEN DWIGHT had held Odin's rifle for him. Odin took it from the man's hand, and looked at the crowd. Once more the antagonism the majority of the settlers had belligerently showed in their glances fell away from them like a puff of smoke vanishing in a strong wind. Odin flung the bloody saber out of his hand, casting it far over the canvas top of one of the wagons, and stepped back with Ben Dwight hastily moving to one side and placing himself behind him.

Captain Buster Jackson rested there for more than a minute on his hands and knees, a helpless-looking thing in the mud and water with the blood still pouring from his face and turning the white froth on his swollen lips into red bubbles. Two men came forward, lifting him to his feet and walking away with him. For the moment all the man's pride was gone. Half those people there in the crowd knew nothing of swordsmanship. All Jackson had told them about himself and his ability with a yard of hilted steel now carried no more weight with the men and the women than any other silly bully's boast. He had been tricked, outpointed, and whipped before the crowd. It was a devastating thing for a man to have to bear. Not in all the rest of his life would he be able to rectify his mistake and regain the awed respect so many of these people had had for him before.

All that and more was in Jackson's face as he moved away. He surprised Odin. Curses ceased to come from him. For once since Odin had known him he saw the man struggling with all his heart and soul in his desperate attempt to get a grip on himself; yet Captain Buster Jackson still had friends in the crowd. Odin knew that. Grimaces of pain had flashed into too many faces when Jackson went down. Men and women here and there still admired the man, still thought he was a master of men. A number of them were yet certain that it had been by some low and vile trick that Odin had downed him.

Ann Green was the first to come forward. Her face looked ghastly. The rain had let up for the time, and the girl had changed her clothing to long, dry coat and a dry hat that evidently belonged to her father. A belted pair of six-shooters were still around her, and from her right wrist dangled a braided quirt made of black leather and looking like a snake wiggling below her hand.

"We enjoyed the spectacle very much, Mr. Odin!" She looked at him as if tiny blazes of fire were leaping and dancing in her eyes. "It was just what we could expect of you."

He turned his back to her, and walked away. It was the worst insult he could have given her. It was an expression of scorn witnessed by every pair of eyes in the crowd. No woman could get over that. A slap in the face would have been easier. The girl whirled. No one knew exactly what was in her mind until she was a yard behind him, and then her quirt swung up and down with a vicious blow that caught him across the shoulders and down across the back with a stroke that burned like a slash from a red-hot sword.

AN' yuh let her get clean away with it!" growled old Ben Dwight ten minutes after the excitement died down. "Didn't even turn 'round. Tell yuh what I'd a—"

"Forget it, Ben." They had come

to one of Dwight's big wagons where Hank Stone and Jeff Oakland, two of Dwight's burly bull drivers, had started a little fire and were making a pot of coffee. "I am no man to spoil a girl's fun when she wants to show off a little in a crowd. Let's hog ourselves in on some coffee."

"Welcome to the hull danged pot, Fate!" grinned Stone. "Jeff's goin' to cook up a little batch of grub if them damn Indians'll keep their distance. Looks like the bunch across the river have moved off for a powwow."

"Makin' heap big medicine, yeah." Dwight looked gloomily toward the river. "That Standin' Wolf bein' among 'em, they ain't lettin' up. He'll make Cryin' Child step the paces. The next time they hit us they'll do a sight more'n they did this mornin'."

Odin turned and strolled away from them with the ever-watchful Dwight at his heels and leaving Jeff Oakland broiling large venison steaks for their breakfast. They moved out on the flat where the wild charges had come from. Bender Love and a few others were there ahead of them. Before they reached the first line of dead Indians and horses they could see that some high excitement was running riot.

The rain had let up. The sky was beginning to clear and grow bright, and in the light lay the bodies of fully two dozen Indians who had been left behind because the reds had not been able to sneak them away. The guns of the whites had been terrific. As usual in such fights many ponies had been killed. With the Indians keeping their distance, Love and the men with him were shooting some of the wounded ponies to get them out of their misery, but even that had come to a halt, and the little group had gathered around the bodies of four men lying on the ground.

"Beats me!" Love was crying when Odin and Dwight walked up. "Beats all thunderation outa me! Look at 'em, Mr. Odin. Four dudes in feathers an' stain an' war paint, an' nary one of 'em's Indian. Know who they are? Two of 'em's drivers what disappeared with their wagons when they supposedly got cut off in the bottoms of Whiskey Crick. This one," he touched the body of a tall, gaunt-faced man, "slid out on us when wagons vanished on the Wishbone. I don't know this duck." He pointed to the fourth body. "But he's white. An' look at some of the guns what was dropped. Latest things out, them two rifles over there. I reckon we can put two an' two together an' say them wagons what disappeared was loaded with guns for the reds."

Others came up a few minutes later. Odin was strangely silent about all of it, and his silence was enough to cause some of the men to look at him suspiciously. He ignored their glances, and as soon as he could he was returning to the wagons with Dwight.

"Yo've got ideas stirrin' 'round in yore head, Fate," ventured the old man when they were having their steaks and coffee. "I can almost see 'em in yore eyes. What do yuh make of it?"

"No more than we've made of it all along, Ben." A thin smile twitched the corners of Odin's mouth. "Somebody in this train is playing us into the hands of the reds. That's fairly well known. The subject's been brought up before—"

"An' the finger of suspicion p'inted at yuh, yeah!" cut in Jeff Oakland. "Maybe it's gettin' ready to p'int yore way ag'in. This time if yuh leave, I'm one what wants to pull

out with yuh, wagons an' all, if Ben'll only agree."

"He can't, Jeff." Odin looked at the man steadily. "This train must go through. Any pulling out would only weaken it. Ben knows that, so don't talk about it. Let things slide along."

His refusal even to talk brought puzzled glances from the men at the fire, but Odin's mind was made up. Silence was the best thing here, and soon after breakfast he was climbing into one of Dwight's wagons and throwing himself down to sleep exhaustedly until late in the afternoon.

WHEN he awoke and climbed out of the wagon, he saw that all the clouds had blown away. A hot sun had shone for the most of the day. Even the river was going down and about to become normal again, and the ground all around had been blistered by the heat until the mud had turned to a hard crust that crackled underfoot.

"An' no Indians yet." Ben Dwight sauntered up to him at the rear end of the wagon. "Nobody understands it. Since ten o'clock this mornin' we ain't been able to spot hide nor hair of one. Looks like they've took 'emselves off for good, Fate. Green says we'll push on in the mornin' if it's still quiet. What's yore plans?"

"I'm leaving when darkness comes." Odin looked at the mobs of people moving in and out of the half-circled train. He noticed that the cattle, horses and mules had been taken out of the train and out on the flat to graze under a heavy guard. He saw new graves inside the wagons, and that told him several men had been buried during his long, hot sleep. "I've got to get back to my wagons."

"An' yo'll need a hoss to take yuh," said Dwight. "Yo'll take my big roan. He's a traveler. But I got a feelin' that ain't good, Fate." He took Odin's arm, and glanced around them cautiously. "Call it what yuh like, but somethin' tells me things ain't goin' to be so quiet when yuh leave."

"I'm only one man, Ben. I can't amount to so much."

"Just enough that yuh saved this train this mornin' by yore comin'," frowned the old man. "Just enough that some people might not be as bold with yuh 'round as they would if yuh wasn't."

"But if I'm so important," Odin was intently watching a little group of sullen-faced men at the south side of the train who were watching him just as closely, "they might have got me out of the picture while I was asleep. A knife put between my ribs—"

"Only nobody had a chance for that," cut in Dwight soberly. "We kept close watch on that wagon yuh slep' in. So close that ever'body knowed we was standin' guard over yuh. It didn't please some."

"Where's Jackson?"

"Keepin' out o' sight, I reckon." A broad grin twisted Dwight's old lips into a one-sided warp. "He ain't no man to take easylike the lickin' yuh lashed on. Can't face the crowd. Green's gal has been doctorin' 'im, but she don't act exactly like she did for some reason. Hanged if some don't think she's kinda gone a little sour on the handsome fella. Yuh know, I've got a feelin' she likes yuh, Fate, in spite of all what's agin' yuh among her Right an' Wrong crowd. Say, what the devil is that comin'?" He lifted his hand quickly, pointing to a little valley west of the river. "If it ain't wagons I'm a liar!"

It was a long, lumbering mass two miles away. Men were at either side of it, keeping well out and away from

it, and riding with their rifles across their laps and their eyes constantly watching the slopes at either side of them.

"Why, Fate," gasped Dwight,

"that's yore outfit! It's yore outfit shore as shootin'. That's yore white hoss behind the last wagon!"

THERE was strong resentment in Mississippi Frank Green's eyes as he watched Odin's great freighters and their eight-yoke ox teams and heavily armed guards cross the river through a swath of shallow water six hundred yards below the wagon train. Green made no attempt to hide his anger. No man could have changed his belief that these men were anything short of ruffians and bloody devils bound for hell as rapidly as they could get there. Yet he could do nothing to halt them. Back on the trail three weeks ago, he would have known what to do. He would have met them with a force of arms no group smaller than his own could have faced without beating a hasty retreat or dying on the spot. He thought of that very thing now as he stole a bitter glance at Odin and old Ben Dwight.

But something had come over Mississippi Frank Green. No one needed to tell him he had lost face with the scores of men and women in his train. He knew that; he could see it. It was entirely too clear that Fate Odin's coming had saved the people from a general slaughter. Too many knew that, and yet Green could not help hating the man for it. Odin had robbed him of a great wealth of his power!

Ignoring the freighters, even when two men and a woman tried to stop him and talk about them, he walked on to Captain Buster Jackson's wagons. He found the man at the rear of the largest one, sitting there sprawled in a makeshift chair constructed of packing cases and covered with blankets and a buffalo robe. To his surprise he found Bender Love sitting close to Jackson and talking to him earnestly in a low voice.

Jackson, himself, was swathed in bandages. A nurse assisted by Ann Green had sewn up the saber gashes in his cheeks and the long rip in his arm. The bandages on his face were as small and neat as they could be, and his arm was in a sling. He looked up as if startled when Green suddenly appeared around the end of the wagon.

"Welcome to our circle, Mr. Green!" He tried to smile. "Glad to have you, sir!"

"And I'm glad to see you two together." For an instant a flicker of suspicion burned in Green's eyes as he took a seat on a packing case and adjusted the sling on his right arm. "Wish everybody else would bury petty disagreements. Maybe I shouldn't mention it, but you two have been slightly on the outs for quite a time."

"We have—foolishly," nodded Jackson. "The best of us make mistakes. Mr. Love and I have an

understanding. I've done a lot of thinking since that unsightly mess this morning, Mr. Green. I apologize for it. It may surprise you to learn that I no longer hold malice toward Odin or any of his men."

"What, captain?" Green's eyes widened. "Say that again!"

"I'm sure you understood me the first time." A smile etched its way across Jackson's bandaged cheeks. "From now on, until we reach Dead Man Basin, and thereafter if I can bring it about, I intend to drop all old grudges. Mr. Odin whipped me fairly. I'm sending him that word by Mr. Love. I forced Odin to fight. Much of it, as you might know, comes from the hatred bred in the war. The war is over, Mr. Green, and I have come to the conclusion that only fools hold malice."

"Well . . . well, I do declare!" Green got up suddenly, a man amazed beyond measure. "You . . . you shock me, Captain Jackson! I don't know what to say."

"A change of heart comes to all good men, Mr. Green." A broad grin was on Love's big face. "I'm going to see Odin. Yuh bet! Plumb tickled to go. He's rough but a good man under the skin in my opinion. Hardships out here an' on the plains make men rough—an' sometimes powerful bad misunderstood."

HE strode away a few minutes later. Green sat back on a packing case. For some reason there were beads of perspiration on his forehead. He did not like the way Jackson was smiling at him. For the first time he had known the man he was prickled with a little pinch of fear that would not leave him. Finally, being a man to express his thoughts regardless of the consequences, he found that he just had to speak.

"This all looks good—on the outside, Captain Jackson," he began haltingly, "but for the minute it seems too good to ring true. You don't like Love. That . . . that is, you never have liked him. With all that had come between you, I can't see how you could ever make peace with Fate Odin. Though, to give the devil his due, I honestly think he's man enough to listen to reason. But . . . but what has come over you?"

"I can explain that in a few words, Mr. Green." Again that strange, watchful expression was on Jackson's face. "Your daughter has had much to do with it. She has spent the most of this day talking to me, making me see the light of reason. She sent Love to me. Mr. Green, Ann has consented to become my wife."

"So that's it!" Green was suddenly on his feet again. "My Ann's the mother of your change of heart!"

"We are going to ask you to marry us when we reach Dead Man Basin, Mr. Green." Jackson spoke quietly, still watching him. "I hope you'll consent."

"Captain Jackson, you'll never marry my Ann!" For an instant a wicked light burned in Green's eyes. "I like you in many ways, sir, but I don't want you for a son-in-law. If there's anything I've done to mislead you, I'm sorry, and I'd rather you'd never ask me why I don't want you in my family. If Ann tried to go against my wishes, I'd put a bullet through her heart, if God would give me strength enough to pull the trigger."

He turned and strode away. Jackson's eyes followed him. That same little smile was on the former captain's face. For a moment he seemed desperately pained, then mildly amused. He watched Green

round the corner of the wagon. He heard his footsteps die away on the crackling cakes of dry mud. His glance shifted then. He looked at a slouchy figure of a man lolling against the corner of a wagon a few steps away. Slowly, his head nodded, and he winked.

Three hours later—with darkness settled and supper fires lighted and guards thrown out around the train—they found Mississippi Frank Green's body in a pool of blood at the outer side of one of his wagons. There was a long knife wound under his left shoulder blade, and his throat had been cut from ear to ear.

CHAPTER V

DEATH SPEAKS AGAIN

TO the surprise of many—and especially his friends inside the train—Odin's wagons had pitched their own camp twelve hundred yards up the river. It was a position of advantage in the Indian country. A great, rocky bank and a barren flat beyond the river made these wagons immune from an attack from the west. Tall rocks shielded them from the north. That left them open to attack only from the east. The Indians would never be so foolish to attack from southward, and that meant the twelve wagons were actually shielding the Green train from an attack from the north. For to even attempt to charge Odin's position from the south or Green's train from the north would place the Indians under a cross-fire that would mean certain disaster.

"Yuh said for us to come if we could, yuh old wolf!" explained Pink Morgan, a big, ruddy-faced Missourian. "We held their bellies to the fire for hours atter yuh left Fort Cache. Toward midnight they drawed off. We expected 'em to come a-roarin' back just 'fore daylight, but they didn't. They only kept a few on the hills as a threat to hold us. Along 'round mid-mornin', I sneaked out o' the fort an' looked all the signs over. Saw there was only about twenty guardin' us."

"And then what, Pink?"

"Oh, hell!" grinned the plainsman, "I took me ten of the boys an' pulled a quick one on 'em. Cut 'em off on a bluff above the crick an' "—he shrugged—"just made 'em quit pickin' on us. We hawg-shot the whole damn bunch."

"Hog-shot them!"

"Shore!" Morgan's far-ringing laugh rolled out across the flat to eastward. "Got 'em hemmed back on that bluff where they had to smell the smoke an' taste the fire or jump. Had 'em dead to rights 'fore they knowed the war was on. Some few jumped. It was a quietish drop. Two hundred foot. Rocks an' foot-deep water at bottom. Anything else yuh wanta know?"

"Nothing else," grinned Odin. "You're Morgan, even to the wart on your nose and the tobacco on your chin!"

They were having supper when Ben Dwight and Bender Love arrived, bringing the news of the mysterious murder of Mississippi Frank Green.

Always a rowdy lot, the bulk of Odin's bearded, revolvered and bowied men were either sitting Indian-fashion on the ground or squatting around one big, crackling fire in the center of the circled wagons. The others were out on their two-hour turns of guard watch in the close-held herd of oxen and horses.

A brown jug of rum had already gone the rounds of the buckskinned circle about the fire. The men were a rough crew to the last man. Danger was their meat of life. Strong

drink and strong words were their salt. Halfway likes and dislikes knew no place among them. They loved or hated, fought among themselves over a word, and were ready to die for one another. Relaxation meant a few heady drinks, a belly-bursting supper, and a round of wild songs. But their singing ceased abruptly when Dwight and Love walked into the firelight and broke their news of Mississippi Frank Green's death.

"Killed slicker'n axle grease on a tomcat's sore back!" explained old Ben, picking up a pan and a tin cup to help himself to a long-delayed supper. "There's a mashed-in place on the back of his head along with the knife work. That means somebody hit 'im from behind, then did the cuttin' atter he fell. Some what don't like yuh, Fate, are hintin' that yuh mighta slipped back to camp—"

DO you believe that, Ben!" Sid Hatton, one of Odin's scouts, was on his feet with a leap, his right hand flying to the butt of a six-shooter at his hip. "If yuh do—"

"Do I believe it!" Dwight whirled upon the man with the sudden scream of a mountain lion. "Of course I believe it, yuh damned old fool! I believed it just enough to unholster a gun an' knock hell out of the man who mentioned it to me—an' if yo've got an idea I mighta even thought I'd believe it, yuh can pull yore gun!"

"Shut up, both of you!" Odin stepped quickly between them. "You should know better than to ask such a fool question, Sid."

"Well . . . well, I reckon I do." Hatton squatted back to his heels. "No hard feelin's, Ben. I guess I just forgot that yo're one of the few men I do trust in that Right an' Wrong outfit. Have a drink, Ben."

"Captain Jackson," put in Love, "thinks an Indian mighta sneaked in an' done it."

"No redskin could have!" shot back Old Ben. "Not unless some white skunk let 'im through the guard line."

"It could have happened only from the river side of the camp. Bender Love's tone was strangely mild. "Captain Jackson said it was not exact to his likin' when Bud Whittaker set the west an' south guard lines. Bud set the west guards over on the other side of the river, back over there in them high rocks an' trees. He set the south line a little too much east of the river, but when Jackson told him he was makin' a mistake Bud said he'd right it as soon as he'd had a bite of supper. If he didn't, an Indian coulda floated down the river like Mr. Odin did last night."

"I don't trust Jackson for all his supposed fine army brains, Bender!" Odin was staring toward Green's camp. "I don't trust Bud Whittaker for too much foresight—"

"Yuh mean, I reckon," cut in Love, "that yuh ain't yet ready to bury the hatchet with Jackson, so to speak, even after I tried to talk to yuh late this afternoon!"

Before Odin could answer him, he saw another moving shadow coming toward the fire from the general direction of the big camp to southward. It turned out to be a tall, thin-faced woman of fifty and dressed in dark blue. Odin recognized her the moment the firelight struck her face. It was Nancy Green, the wife of Mississippi Frank. She had been crying. Her eyes were still red, but the rest of her face was startlingly white. She walked straight to Odin, and immediately came to the point of her mission in his camp.

"I've come straight to you," she began. "Don't ask me why. My coming is enough to tell you I trust you. I need you, Fate Odin. It . . . it's," her voice threatened to break for the first time, "about my Ann."

"Ann!" exclaimed Odin. "What about the girl, Mrs. Green?"

"She's disappeared," answered the woman simply. "She's nowhere in camp nor anywhere around it."

"But—"

"There are no 'buts' about it, Mr. Odin!" The woman held up her hand to halt him. "Ann's gone. She would never have left the camp unless forced to leave it. Something terrible has happened to my daughter, Mr. Odin. I . . . I can't stand much more!"

Her last words were an outburst of violent weeping, and Odin caught her in his arms as she was sinking to her knees at his feet.

THERE was excitement everywhere when Odin reached the big camp with Mrs. Green. Bender Love, Pink Morgan and old Ben Dwight were right behind them. They found mobs of people swarming around the Green wagons. Among them, looking very grave in his bandages and half supported on the arm of one of his drivers, was Captain Buster Jackson. He looked at Odin pleadingly.

"Odin, forgive me for all that is past!" He thrust out his left hand. "I've been a fool. Maybe there are times when we've both been all of that and more, but I . . . I'd like to let bygones be bygones. This thing here is almost more than I can bear. First it was Mr. Green, a man I admired as I did my own father, and then it's my dear, beautiful Ann. It can't be what some are saying. Don't believe it. Don't believe an accursed word of their rotten talk!"

"And what are they saying?" demanded Odin after he reluctantly shook hands with the man.

"Some of these fools," cried Jackson, "are trying to say it's suicide! Some are saying she threw herself into the river. I know it is not true. Damn it, she would never desert her mother, even if she could be turned from me with her grief. She promised to be my wife only today."

Odin got himself away from the man as quickly as he could. He did not want to hold a grudge. He had beaten Jackson at all his games, and to another Jackson's grief now might have been enough to win the sympathy of a harder heart than his. And yet there was something strange here. Fate Odin had caught some of the philosophy of the hardened crews of fighting men who followed him back and forth across the plains. Those men liked a man when they first met him, or they never liked him. He had not thoroughly liked Jackson in the beginning. The feeling of animosity had grown steadily, and it was hard for Odin to believe the man now.

"Who started this suicide talk?" He asked that of an angular woman of forty from the back country of Missouri as he walked to the edge of the river and halted. "Who was the first to mention it."

"Not a-bein' thar, I ain't got me noaways 'er sayin'," answered the woman. "Hit was jes' talk here an' talk thar. Ye never know how the wind starts a-blowin'. Hit jes' blows."

It was the same when he questioned others. The women were the most sympathetic. They liked Ann Green and the children had loved her. It was not until Odin came upon the giant Bender Love again

that he received any inkling of how the suicide talk had started.

"I heard the gal cryin'," admitted the man half reluctantly. "She was sayin' somethin' 'bout not bein' able to stand it 'cause of her daddy havin' to die like he did. She was plumb hard-eyed about it at first, as ever'-body'll swear. Them kind what don't bust right out weepin' are the ones yo've gotta watch. But I ain't believin' no suicide stuff. Hell, it's somethin' else!"

"Where's Bud Whittaker?"

When Odin asked that question it was like a shock that sped all over the camp in an instant. Bud Whittaker had evidently been forgotten. A quick search of the camp and the guard lines failed to bring back a word of the man, but it did bring forth another bubble of suspicion. Bud Whittaker was more or less a handsome man, one who had been a right-hand supporter to the Right and Wrong Committee in all its undertakings. A foolish whisper grew that it was possible that the girl had gone momentarily insane in her grief and Whittaker had enticed her away from the camp. But that small talk died away almost as soon as it was started.

Odin went back to the high rocks on the bank of the river. He moved along the bank slowly, this time carrying a torch of rich pine splinters in his right hand and his rifle clutched under his left arm. It looked like a foolish quest. At any place along the bank the girl could have leaped into the swift water below.

Old Ben finally joined him, and then the silent, ever-watchful Pink Morgan with a rifle in the crook of his arm. They kept moving, and anyone watching them would not have accredited them with any more than the hopeless pretense of three men vainly stumbling along in search for a clue where they knew one would never be found.

It was almost like that. They saw several places where a person could have safely walked down narrow trails to the water's edge, but no hint of an actual lead came to them until

they strayed to a point four rods below the last wagon at the south side of the half circle.

WITHOUT a torch even Odin's keen eyes would never have found what he did find finally. It was down between a crack in the rocks, a beady red eye no larger than the head of a pin that gleamed up at him with reflected light. He stopped, looked all around them, and held the light closer. A moment later he was deftly plucking something small and golden from between the rocks.

"What is it, Fate?" whispered Morgan. "Important?"

"One of Ann Green's hairpins set with red stones." Odin's voice was low. "Say nothing yet. I have a feeling that we're being watched."

"Foul play, eh?" grunted Old Ben. "And the makers of the said foul play still in camp."

"Right!" agreed Odin after they had moved on down a steep trail and had come to a narrow strip of sand at the water's edge. "Take a good look, and remember everything. This light goes out quickly now."

He held the torch downward for

just a moment, and then appeared to let it slip accidentally out of his hand into the river. Darkness instantly closed around them, but they had seen enough.

There were moccasin tracks of Indians in the sand, three pairs of them. With them were the boot tracks of a white man, and in one place there were the tracks of a girl's shoes. Odin had seen where they had all disappeared. It was a deep gouge in the sand. A glance had told him that a heavy log had been grounded there, and he saw that his trick of the night before had been repeated.

"Now it's all clear," nodded Odin, speaking in a tone scarcely louder than a whisper. "Either somebody's dumb and very dumb or they think we are. I believe these tracks were deliberately left here as a ruse to make us follow."

"Yeah, a trap!" exclaimed Dwight. "But it does show what happened to the girl. Shows that there's no joke to her bein' taken away, an' now it looks like they want yuh to follow, Fate, an'—"

His words were cut short by the double-thundering roars of two shotguns in the darkness across river and a hail of buckshot suddenly pouring among them. Old Ben Dwight let out one short, hoarse cry, and fell dead at Odin's feet.

CHAPTER VI

FRIENDS TAKE A HAND

ODIN heard the buckshot striking all around him and filling his face with prickling needles of granite from the wall of the river bank behind him. Old Ben Dwight had been between him and Pink Morgan, and it was later evident, when they had time to think about it, that the shots from across the river had been fired at Odin. But his rifle and Morgan's rifle were blazing back at the places where the roaring gashes of flame had appeared.

There was a yell from some man over there in the rocks as Odin fired. Another screech came with the blazing of Morgan's weapon. Still shooting, Odin and Morgan were moving away from each other, a pair of long-seasoned fighters who knew exactly what to expect of each other when caught in one-sided battle like this.

Above them the camp was already roaring to life. Swarms of men came rushing down the river. Odin did not wait for them. He plunged out in the water, found it waist-deep at this point, and hurriedly crossed the river. He moved rapidly up through the rocks on the western bank, and slipped quickly behind a tree as he heard a low groan ahead of him in the darkness.

With all the shooting suddenly halted, Pink Morgan was soon joining him with his buckskins streaming water. Then there were cries behind them from other men swarming around the body of old Ben Dwight, and in a few moments more and more men were wading across the river while guards in the rocks above Odin and Morgan started yelling like men suddenly going mad.

"Indians! Indians!"

"Yo're all a pack of liars!" Morgan roared back as he and Odin stepped gingerly forward, moved around a rock, and came upon the squirming figure of a white man lying there in the weeds and grass with an empty shotgun beside him. "Here's yore Indian—an' he's as white as any man in the whole train!"

They found the second would-be killer a few minutes later as the rocks and trees swarmed full of men.

Morgan's bullet had shattered the man's right hip. He had dragged himself back among the rocks in a mad scramble to get away. As Odin and Morgan stepped from the darker shadows, the man made one wild move to unholster a six-shooter. With quick work, Odin might have taken him a prisoner alive, but the hotheaded Morgan shot the man through the head just as Odin was throwing out his hand to stop him.

"Hell with 'im!" cried Morgan. "We know that he killed Ben or helped do it, an' I ain't nary han' to pet rattlesnakes what lie in the grass to kill yuh. Here, let me blast a couple or three good bullets into that sick-lookin' face of that other lowdown whelp, Fate, an' send him on to hell where he belongs."

"Take the other man a prisoner before Pink gets to him!" cried Odin, still holding on to Morgan. "And you wait a minute, you fool!" He gave Morgan a hard jerk, whirling him around and tripping him to his knees. "Only living men can talk, Pink, and we'll make that snake talk if you'll leave him alive. Man, we've got to make him talk!"

But the possibility of getting the man to talk was cut short by the sudden roar of a heavy Colt. One of Bender Love's drivers, a long-legged, hatchet-faced, bucktoothed man by the name of Peter Shaw, had come charging into the scene. Odin could have sworn that the wounded man was in too much pain or too near death to have even tried to pull a six-shooter from either of the long holsters at his hips, but Peter Shaw had sent his bullet crashing through the center of the man's forehead.

"I tell yuh, folks," Shaw kept raging and dancing about like a scarecrow with a six-shooter in each hand, "he was a-goin' for his gun, an' I didn't take me no chances with a killer wolf like 'im. No, sir, I busted him clean out o' the ruction, I did!"

"And I suppose you saw who he was before all that blood covered his face?" There was ill-held anger in Odin's tone when he caught the man by the shoulder and made him holster his six-shooters and stop his wild dancing about. "That was one of your cronies, Shaw. His name was Dude Glint, if you haven't forgotten him, you fool! And the other was Sam Buckwell, a pal of Bud Whittaker's."

"That . . . that was Dude Glint?" Shaw gasped the words, his mouth working like an opening and closing trap. "An' . . . an' the tother'n's Sam Buckwell? What in the hell are yuh sayin' to me, Odin? It couldn't be them. I . . . I was just relieved from guard out here not long ago by Dude!"

"Just the same, I've told you who they were," frowned Odin, sick with the disappointed feeling of a golden opportunity snatched right out of his hands. "Glint would have talked. He was that kind. Everybody in the train knew it. A little work on him, and we would have had a lot of mystery cleared tonight. I think you'd better get the hell back to the other side of the river—and stay there!"

"Yuh ain't orderin' us about, Odin!" Clint Ludlow stepped forward. He was a big, sullen-faced blond man, well known as another close friend to Bud Whittaker. "The Rights an' Wrongs once kicked yuh an' yore gang out o' the train. Ain't nobody yet said yuh was back an' runnin' it. Nobody ain't yet said yuh have a right to give orders. I don't trust yuh, Fate Odin!"

ODIN'S patience was gone. Without another word, his right fist slammed upward and forward. There was a *crack* like something breaking

under a heavy strain, and the fist had landed flush against the point of Clint Ludlow's jaw.

Ludlow went down as if a mule had kicked him in the face. He sprawled backward, his feet flying up and then downward to spread his full length of six feet on the ground. For a second he was like a bully with all the air and ire knocked out of him, and then he was coming up. Before he could get to his feet, Odin passed his rifle to Morgan.

As soon as Ludlow could get himself set for a fighting charge, Odin was smashing into him again. He drove the man backward with rights and lefts, burst his nose, split open a cheek, and suddenly Ludlow was down again. This time it was right on the bank of the river, and Odin did not wait. He reached down and caught the man by his shoulders, snatching him up. As if he was some human machine in action, he hurled Ludlow in the air, and heaved him forward to land him with a splash into the river.

"An' that," chuckled Pink Morgan, "is the way to get things done, gents. Anybody in the crowd what don't like it? If there is, step forward, two at a time if it suits yore purty fancy."

"Make it six, gents." Two more of Odin's men stepped out of the crowd. "We ducks what fly with Fate like to fight. I was born with a bowie in each han' an' two sets of jaw teeth to back up my play."

"Which is sayin' he's as tame an' playful as a polecat kitten 'longside of me!" Another Odin man was popping into it. "I was born in a den of rattlesnakes an' suckled by a grizzly bear. My gran'pa used to scratch his back with a wild catamount until he was a hundred an' ninety-nine, an' gran'ma could shoot the eyebrow—"

"Keep your shirt on, boys!" ordered Odin. "I think this thing has gone far enough, except for one little detail. Grab Pete Shaw. Take him to my camp, and see why he had to kill Dude Glint so quickly. I think he knew Dude would talk, and for some reason he didn't want that."

"Now what in the hell is this!" cried Shaw, suddenly trying to back away. "Yuh smart fools can't pull this on me. Hell, I'll fight the whole damn crowd!"

"What with, yuh long-legged crane!" One of old Ben Dwight's drivers stepped toward the man with a six-shooter in his hand. The man's voice was so hoarse with emotion Odin did not recognize him at first as Jeff Oakland. "Anything yuh can do to he'p Fate, yo'll do. A man what's been like an older brother to me was killed tonight. That man was Ben Dwight, an' we're goin' to find out why he was killed by one of yore pards. That means, mister, that whatever Fate Odin says will be the thing what goes strongest with me. Now reach for a gun, jaybird, an' I'll make yuh eat it!"

THEY were wading back across the river after quiet had been restored. Odin did not see Clint Ludlow on either bank of the stream, but he knew what had happened. Some of Ludlow's friends had laid heavy hands on the bully and had hustled him away and back to his place in the camp where a sharp eye could be kept over him until some of his ire had cooled.

Peter Shaw had changed from a crowing scarecrow to a white-faced prisoner, with Jeff Oakland gripping his right arm and Big Charley King, one of Odin's men, holding the other. The man had been shorn of his weapons, but his eyes were constantly watching the crowd as if in

hopes some help would come to him.

"Take him on to my wagons as I told you," ordered Odin as they reached the big camp, "and work him over. You know what we want."

"An' know how to get it, yeah," nodded Jeff Oakland. "Hustle along, big-toothed fella!" He gave Shaw an extra jerk on the arm. "We crave yore company, an' there ain't no friend what'll take yuh 'way from us. Just keep that in mind."

Odin left them at the lower end of the big camp. Not yet did he know just what he was going to do, but Pink Morgan was there behind him, ready for anything, and behind Morgan were three more of his men.

A yell of alarm from the upper end of the camp halted Fate. He saw a mob of people whirl and go pouring out through a gap in the close-locked wagons. A moment later he heard Jeff Oakland yelling his name in a far-ringing voice.

"Fate! Fate Odin! Come here quick!"

"Coming!"

Odin yelled back his answer, and was hurrying forward with Morgan swinging into a run behind him and the others following. Before they could reach the gap in the wagons, a crowd had already poured through the opening and were gathering in a wide-eyed circle fifty feet beyond it.

"I heard somethin' hit!" Jeff Oakland was saying that in an excited voice to the noisy mob steadily gathering around him. "It went *ka-plop!* Sort o' like a ball of soft mud sounds when yuh throw it agin' a rock. Shaw just kind o' grunted, an' then he was wiltin' right down betwix us with his mouth workin' an' him tryin' to say somethin', but nary word got out of him."

"And what was it, Jeff?" demanded Odin, pushing his way through the crowd. "A knife?"

"An' what a knife, yeah!" exclaimed Oakland, standing there staring at the body of Peter Shaw as if he could not believe the man was actually dead. "Somebody was hidin' in or behind one of them wagons back there where it's dark. Whoever he was, he could sure throw a knife!"

ODIN dropped quickly beside the limp body of Shaw. The moon was not yet up. There was only a flare of light on the ragged mountain ranges to eastward to mark its coming, but there was enough glow in the sky for Odin to see everything clearly enough.

That Shaw had been killed almost instantly was a certainty, and the man who had killed him had been an expert when it came to knife-throwing. The knife was still there, a wicked bone-hilted thing in the dead man's back and its broad, twelve-inch blade driven through him. It was a hard-lipped wound, and when Odin took hold of the hilt and tried to draw the blade out of Shaw's back he found that it was as firmly driven through the flesh and bone as a root of a tree grown in rocky ground.

"A wizard's work, and that's a certainty." Odin straightened, looking at the closely knit circle of people around him. "Will somebody call Bender Love?"

"Right here, my good friend, an' at yore service, sir!" The powerful shape of the man came pushing through the crowd. "My eyes, I reckon, are as good as the next man's." He held up a great ham of a hand. "The hilt of that blade in Shaw's back even looks like the knife I tote, but it ain't. Here's mine." He unsheathed a long, powerful weapon from his belt, and offered it

Boulders were the only weapons Odin had to stop that horde of Indians!

to Odin. "Look it over. I'm sorry the blade's a little messy, but I sometimes cut my chawin' tobacco with it."

"Thanks, Bender." Odin waved the dangerous-looking knife aside. "My apology with it."

"First time I ever saw yuh licked flat on the spot, Fate," growled Pink Morgan as they moved on toward Odin's camp a little while later, leaving the body of Peter Shaw to the care of his friends. "Don't know how yuh come to make such a blunder. Half the crowd laughed at yuh, laughed at all of us! Made me feel sick at the belly. This thing ain't got yuh rattled, has it, Fate?"

"Not quite, Pink." Odin glanced around them to make sure that only friends were within earshot. "Don't worry about it. I'm fairly satisfied with it all."

"But yo're quittin' cold!" Morgan could not yet understand him. "Mrs. Green was back there in the crowd, wringin' her hands, an' lookin' at yuh for he'p, an' the tears rollin' down her cheeks when she watched yuh walk away. Bender Love just knocked the socks off of yuh! Why, some back there are even hintin' that Jeff an' Charley killed Shaw to cover yuh up for some reason!"

"Keep your shirt on—and shut up!" Odin ordered flatly. "Bender Love was unintentionally a real friend tonight. He gave me my first real lead. We're coming through from now on."

"I don't sabe yuh, Fate. I thought of him an' his big knife, too, but he put 'imself in the clear mighty quick."

"Too quick!" There was a strange glow of satisfaction in Odin's eyes. "Bender killed Peter. He was right there to prove he was innocent by showing his knife—at least one of them—to prove himself clear, and without waiting to be accused. There's such a thing as a man being too damned smart at times!"

"An' . . . an' do yuh link 'im with Green's killin', too?"

"Either actually or a party to it, Pink. It's something that will work itself out. We're going to make ready for a trail now; we're going after Ann Green."

CHAPTER VII

HONEST THIEF

FIVE miles down the river, the heavy log with four men and a girl on it was nearing the end of its journey. With the efforts of three Indians using their feet and legs as paddles thrust in the water as they sat astride of it, the log swung toward the east bank of the stream, leaving the swift water and working its way into a long, deep pool under the frowning shadow of a towering wall of blue-black cliffs.

Ann Green turned her head, and looked at the grinning face of Bud Whittaker. Her hands were still bound behind her back. The big, choking gag was still in her mouth and its knot pressed so far back it was hard for her to get her breath. She was soaked through from the spray, and it had been the cold water that had brought her back to her senses shortly after she had been carried aboard the log.

Before that things were very much of a blank. She remembered that Whittaker had waited his chance and had whispered for her to meet him at the lower side in the camp, and thinking the man had discovered some secret about her father's murderer, the girl had followed him. He had been nice enough about it to a point, and she hardly remembered his striking her. She had been

slightly ahead of him, and the blow had come from behind, right after a quick hand had slid like a flash across her shoulder and closed over her mouth to shut out any outcry that she could have made. She did not remember that Whittaker had carried her down the trail to the river's edge, and that he had stood her on her feet in the sand to deliberately leave her tracks behind.

"We'll soon be there, pretty one."

Whittaker spoke softly, sitting there at her back with his long arms around her and his hands clasped across her to make certain that she would not plunge into the dangerous water and try to get away from him.

"Be nice, and we'll be nice; little one. Be ugly, and we'll have to be ugly, too. There'll be things happening that'll make you happy if you'll just be patient. Here, I guess it's safe enough now to take that gag off of you for a little while."

He slipped a hand upward, gave a knot a quick pull behind the girl's head, and a knotted handkerchief was slipped and gently pulled out of her numb mouth.

"Take it easy now," he warned. "A lot of redskins are just ahead, and they'll make it hard on you if you don't listen to me."

"Where . . . where are you taking me?" She managed to speak in a rush of gasps. "And what are these Indians doing with us?"

"One's a Sioux and the others are Cheyennes," chuckled Whittaker. "Nice playmates if you know how to treat them—and I was sent along with you because I know how to deal with them."

"And . . . and what is it about this thing that I am to like!"

"Several things, Ann." He tightened his arms around her. "I've heard you say you hated the sight of Fate Odin. Right now we've laid a trail behind us for him to follow, and when the reds once get him in their hands maybe I can talk them into letting you touch the first spark of fire to the stake."

"What are you talking about!" she cried. "You turn me free, Bud Whittaker. Untie my hands—"

"Quiet!" He gave her a hard squeeze that sent darting pains through her ribs. "Want that gag back in your mouth, you pretty little fool! If you don't, just keep quiet. There may be a lot of things you don't want, but there's nothing you can do about it. People in hell would like a drink of water, and some very likely don't want to be there at all, but there they are, and there they'll stay. Keep cool now. This log's going to land under those rocks."

Keeping quiet was the only thing she could do. She was too awed for anything else a few minutes later. The forward end of the log was run in under a black shelf of rock. When it came to a halt, Whittaker and the Indians helped her to her feet. Supporting her at either side, they half carried her forward, and she felt solid rock under her feet.

"Little Crow will go on and clear the rest of the way for us," explained Whittaker. "We'll follow."

AFTER that they were winding upward on a steep shelf. It was narrow and dangerous. At times they had to creep, but it grew lighter after they had climbed upward for two hundred feet. At this point they turned abruptly into a V-shaped crack, and Ann Green caught a glimpse of reflected firelight ahead of them and heard a low rise and fall of voices speaking in a tongue she could not understand.

They had passed many Indians standing guard silently in the dark-

ness and apparently not even glancing at them, for Little Crow had cleared the way for them. The mouth of a great hole in the rocks was the next thing to appear. At first it looked like a cave with a swarm of feathered and war-painted Indians sitting around a fire in the center of a great room. The odor of broiling and burning meat assailed Ann, and then she heard Bud Whittaker start speaking and realized that he was talking to the Indians in their own tongue.

A handsome young warrior wearing an enormous war bonnet had come forward. He had dropped a sharpened stick on the end of which he had been broiling a piece of meat that looked like venison. He had gulped down the hot, half-raw meat like the savage he truly represented, and wiped his greasy fingers on his leggings. To Ann Green's surprise, the young hellion gave her only one contemptuous glance and seemed to regard her as worthy of nothing else.

"His name's Running Dog, and he says you're pretty but weak." Whittaker told her that with a one-sided smile after talking rapidly with the young buck for a minute. "They judge women by how much real hard work they can do. Come along, sister."

He took her firmly by the right arm, urging her forward. Running Dog had turned to lead the way. They passed the first fire, and, rounding a bend, came to another. Ann had been terrified at first. Now, for some strange reason, all the feelings of fear had left her. Even the ache of her arms had become numb. She walked like a machine, half-listening to Whittaker's run of low talk beside her until some remark angered her.

"You're insane even to dream of Fate Odin walking into a trap like this!" she said scornfully. "What a fool you are!"

"Odin will be trapped long before he gets this far, sweetheart." Whittaker laughed. "Either caught or killed, my dear."

"How does it happen that you hate him enough for this kind of a trick?"

"I don't hate him, Ann." There was a note of honest sincerity in the man's tone. "I actually rather like the cuss, but I'm like others. I'm afraid of him and his crew."

"But . . . but why?" she stammered.

"It's simple!" he answered bluntly. "Fate Odin's on the square, and I'm what polite society calls a rotter, a two-faced scoundrel—and a few more pet names. I take gold and silver where and how I find it. I can even assist in the murder of a preacher and carry his daughter away to a redskin camp."

"You . . . you mean you killed my father!" she cried, and would have stopped to face him if he had not shoved her on. "You mean—"

"Quiet!" He gave her arm a brutal squeeze. "I said I assisted. That's all I did do. Bender Love threw his big blade into him from behind. I only hit him on the head and cut his throat after he was down. We wanted it to look like a man with two good hands and arms did the job. We didn't want Odin to suspect Buster Jackson for any of it. We like Jackson—"

"Sure!" Whittaker looked straight into her terror-filled face and there was something in his eyes in the light of a fire that made them glint with a madman's gleam. "Truth's truth, little darling. I'm a painstakingly honest thief when I can afford to be. Now, what in hell!"

Ann Green had suddenly gone

limp against him. As if every bone in her body had become jelly, she was falling. He caught her before she could have done herself serious damage on the rocks underfoot.

"Damn it, she's fainted!" He hissed that, and then looked at Running Dog to speak to the man in his own language. "Man who sends guns said to big scare her. White Shadow scare too big."

CHAPTER VIII

CLIFF OF THE WINDS

WHEN Fate Odin and Pink Morgan left their camp, it was almost as mysteriously silent as shadows vanishing into the night. There was something catlike about it. A pair of mottled bays had been caught for them and saddled out there in a ravine. Thieves could not have worked with less noise and secrecy, and yet every man in the camp knew they were going. Every man in Fate Odin's camp could be trusted. They might get drunk on a Saturday night and shoot up a town the following Sunday morning when everybody was out in his best bib and tucker, but no man could question their loyalty.

"You know what to do," he had told Sid Hatton and old Nance Crowder, another tall plainsman. "You and the rest of the boys know the route we're taking, and we'll mark our trail the best I can. Do everything you can for that big train down there. Those who doubt you don't know any better. Give the most of them a year or two in this country, and you'll never regret it. They'll make fighting people by that time."

"We'll do our best, Fate," Crowder compromised grimly. "We know somethin's comin'. What it is we can't say, but we'll try to meet it. It'll be bad, though. They want ye off an' out o' the show. They're afraid of ye, son. Don't seem likely a big bunch should fear one man, but it's said from St. Joe to Bitter Root Pass that ye've got nine lives just like a fightin' tomcat, an' there ain't but one or two of 'em been kilt. Take it as easy as ye can. 'Tain't nary speck of use for me to tell ye to fight like hell when they corner ye, 'cause ye'll do that—an' somethin' tells me you'll be a-comin' back."

They had moved quietly on down the ravine to where it opened into the river. Here the water was deep and swift, but there was a gash in the rocks on the other bank, and they were soon swimming their horses toward it. After that it was zigzag work until they were two miles west of the main camp, and then they were swinging southward with Odin in the lead for a good two hundred yards while Morgan brought up the rear.

It was the way for two men to travel in dangerous country. In daylight they would have been much farther apart. If anything happened to Odin, if he happened to ride into an ambush, Morgan could whirl his horse and make a run for it with a reasonable chance of accomplishing a getaway.

And Odin knew where he was going. He had buffalo-hunted every mile of this part of the country four years before when troops were stationed at Fort Cache. With his skinners and his big wagons, he had furnished the fort every pound of meat the soldiers used for almost a year. At times it had been hell, with far more Indians to fight than buffalo they could find to shoot, but it had given him a knowledge of all this wild country for forty miles around, and there was a feeling of

certainty that refused to leave him as he kept on to southward.

The Cliff of the Winds had seemed to him the most likely place. Indians had hidden there before. The arrogant Standing Wolf's father, old Crazy Eagle, had wiped out a wagon train there in the late '60s, and with a mere handful of men had whipped four hundred soldiers, keeping them at bay until all his warriors had escaped. Those cliffs would be the ideal spot now. Neither Standing Wolf nor the reckless Chief Crying Child would dare to head northward, because soldiers were apt to be encountered in Dead Man Basin.

"That leaves the east and west out for the time also." Odin had made that statement before leaving camp. "The mountains mark that. Too rough. Those reds are after this wagon train, and something tells me a number of the wagons are going to be allowed to escape after the looting is over."

The going was slow. The bright little moon sending down its mellow light was dangerous and helpful by turns. Odin halted many times, and moved his horse out of sight, a signal for Morgan to take hurried cover behind him. Once he flung himself out of his saddle and seized his horse's nose to keep him from nickering to the ponies of a group of riders suddenly appearing ahead of him and crossing the valley from the west.

AFTER that there were many halts. Every step of the way was growing more and more dangerous. Indians kept appearing. Each group was small and traveling lightly and rapidly. Odin was worried when he finally pulled to a halt and waited for Morgan to catch up with him in the inky darkness of a cluster of dense willows surrounding a little waterhole at the head of a big ravine a mile west of the river.

"Looks like all the reds this side of damnation are on the move, Pink," he whispered while their horses were drinking. "Looks bad for the folks behind us."

"Plenty bad," nodded Morgan with an anxious frown. "Bad because it's some trick of Standin' Wolf's. I don't give Cryin' Child credit for too many brains. Standin' Wolf scattered the gangs, an' they're just now comin' back, or other help's comin' in to join his show. But I thought yuh was headin' for the Cliff of the Winds? We're 'way below it now."

"A mile below, yes," agreed Odin. "The spot I wanted. They'll expect everything from the north or the west, and there's where the strong watch will be kept. I caught a faint glimpse of firelight when we passed the main spur—"

"Yeah, but is there any way in or out of them high holes except from the north an' west?"

"There's at least one that I know of, Pink. Standing Wolf will know about it, too. He'll have a few guards on it. It's just a wild goat trail leading to a pot hole in the top of the cliffs, but it's my hope. If my bowie doesn't fail me, I'll get through."

Danger whispered at Odin from every clump of shadow when he left Morgan and the horses. He shook it off and pressed on like a walking arsenal with a rifle cradled across his bosom, and his shoulders and middle weighted with six-shooters and cartridge belts.

The moon worried him for its sheer brightness, and he kept to the ravine. It was leading gradually toward the river, but as it kept bearing away to southward he left it at last, and

turned straight toward the river, halting here and there behind low trees and clumps of brush.

It appeared simple enough. He was not molested all the way, but it was nerve-snapping work. Cold beads of perspiration kept popping out on his forehead. He was always halting to throw himself flat on his stomach and study some queer blob of shadow that looked like a man hiding.

When he reached the river, it was a danger spot that would have taxed every nerve in a troop of cavalry. The stream was shallow enough, but the moonlight glared blindingly on the water, making it possible for a wading man to be seen from all of two hundred yards in either direction. He took the bold way about it. Stooping forward and holding a pine top over his head to make himself look as near like a deer or some other large animal as he could, he made the crossing, and quickly lost himself in the brush and rocks on the eastern bank of the stream. Thirty minutes later he was killing his first Indian on the slope.

THE sound of a rolling bit of gravel saved his life. It was a sound ever so faint, a mere little scraping noise in the black shadows and coming from under the overhanging ledges ahead. Up to this point he had moved as noiselessly as a ghost after crossing the river, and yet he had made good time in the dangerous darkness. He was now well up on the south slopes of the Cliff of the Winds—right up where death could be expected at any moment.

But the noise brought him to a sudden halt. He stepped to one side, pressing himself into the deeper darkness between two tall rocks under a black overhang. An instant's hesitation would have brought a yell from a guard, and the sound would have spelled his doom.

He held his breath, easing down his rifle and clutching his long-bladed bowie in his right hand. A shadow seemed to ooze itself out of the deeper darkness. It was a tall Indian, a powerfully knit fellow with his rifle in his hand and a blanket clutched around him to keep off the cold. The man halted right in front of Odin, his eyes peering on down the dark slope. After a moment he started to turn back.

But Odin was to quick for him. His left hand shot forward, across the Indian's shoulder and closed over the man's mouth. The right hand swung in with the knife. There was a ripping, upward stroke, and a mere grunt as the long blade drove all the way to the hilt. Odin gave it a fierce twist, and eased a dead man down on the rocks.

The second kill was almost as easily and quickly done as the first. The war bonnet and the dark blanket of the first Indian helped. Along with that was Fate Odin's knowledge of the language of the Sioux, another help that was to favor him before he was much older. He put on the headgear, flung the blanket around him, and moved on, leaving the Indian's body carefully thrust back in the rocks where he had hidden.

There were no fighting rules here. A man without tricks was a man lost among warring red men. Nothing was foul. One used fire to fight fire, and Odin had no qualms about this business of stabbing an Indian from behind. Killing from behind was an Indian habit. A man dead was a man out of the way. An Indian killed him how and when he could.

A curve in the trail made it a trifle lighter, but with the blanket

clutched around him and his head tilted forward in the big bonnet, Odin kept right on. To anyone above him he would have looked like the big buck returning along the ledge, and that was certainly who he must have looked like to an Indian who appeared ahead of him squatting on a blanket.

The man on the blanket lifted his head lazily. He was evidently tired of the business of having to sit perched high on a dangerous ledge when there seemed no earthly need of it. With his one sullen glance, he lowered his head again. It was the last time he lowered it. Odin's long knife bit through the back of his neck at the base of the spine, and the Indian flattened himself on the rocks like a bullfrog killed in a midair leap.

It took but a few moments to get the body out of the way. A slight lift and a shove with a foot would have sent it plunging down the ledges for nearly a thousand feet before it would have come to a halt as a crushed bag of bloody flesh and broken bones at the edge of the river, but the noise it would have made was something Odin did not want. He picked up the body carefully, and thrust it back in another crack in the rocks. Just as he finished his task and stepped back, the threat of another danger came to him in the sound of a voice on up the ledge.

"Man-who-stole-the-knife!" an Indian called, speaking in Sioux. "Go inside cook meat and eat. Stingy Crow will go inside cook meat and eat, and talk to Running Wolf. Red Horse has full belly. Red Horse will watch trail."

ODIN grunted his reply, and made a scraping noise on the rocks with the butt of his rifle to tell the man above him he was coming. Then he stood the rifle against the rocks to free his left hand for the work to come. As he thought at least one of the Indians he had killed would have done, he took his time about it. He dreaded the ever-brightening light the higher a man traveled up the trail. Here in the darkness he could pass very well as an Indian for a moment or two, but up there it would have to be fast work.

He adjusted the blanket, and kept on. His head was down and the blanket pulled up closely around his throat. The big bowie was ready, his hand itching for the stroke. From what the Indian had said, this would be the last guard until he reached the pot hole up there in the peak of the cliff.

"Where is Red Horse?" demanded a tall Indian a moment later, a man who stood on the last sharp rise like a great-muscled statue with the moon and sky a flame of brightness above him.

"Red Horse is slow," answered Odin, keeping the blanket over his mouth to muffle his voice. "Red Horse always like old squaw."

They were together then. Odin had stepped up the last rise of the rocks. The moonlight fell upon him. It was time for lightning work, and he started it. He acted as if he was going right on past the man. His left foot seemed to slip. It was a trick that gave him the quick excuse to throw himself against the Indian and thrust out his left hand to save himself from falling.

It was a wicked ruse. Only a man forced to use Indian tactics could have stomached it. The Indian was taken by such surprise and unawareness of any trick that he even tried to catch Odin by the shoulder to keep him from going off the high pinnacle. It was then that Odin's left

hand shot to the man's throat and closed upon it like a powerful talon digging its fierce claws into the flesh and choking back all efforts of a startled outcry.

They went down like two desperately fighting wild animals snarling at each other's throats and try-

ing to rip each other into ribbons. The gravel rolled under them, making a slight scraping sound. Some of the pebbles rolled off the pinnacle, and went rattling down the ledge and the slope, but the noise was not yet great enough to attract attention, and Odin kept right on trying to make his kill.

But the Indian was a fighting man from the top of his feathered head to the tips of his moccasined toes. There was no fear in his glittering black eyes when Odin got a deep look into them in the moonlight. They were the fierce, killer eyes of a tiger in a death struggle.

Without Odin's hand dug deeply in his throat, the Indian would have cried out for help. There was no doubt about that, but it would not have been because of fear for himself. He could take care of himself! He had been caught off his guard; he had actually been tricked off his feet, but he was using those feet as well as both hands, a hissing devil down on his back and fighting with four sets of claws!

They came up from the ground with the Indian gripping Odin's right wrist with his left hand and trying to get his own knife or a six-shooter with his right. At times Odin's death grip on the man's throat did not seem to bother him at all; at times the Indian seemed incapable of the feel of pain.

Odin heard a belt squeak as they staggered back and forth. He tripped the Indian just in time to keep him from drawing some kind of a weapon, and they were down again, the same fighting pair of wild animals there on the rocks. They rolled over and over, first one on top, then the other. For a moment they were perched on the lip of a sudden drop-off, and then they were rolling back and stumbling and fighting to their feet again.

The end came almost accidentally. Driving the Indian backward, Odin felt the man slump to the right as his foot dropped into a deep crack in the rocks. The man was falling then. Something cracked. A right leg was broken! For the first time since they had been fighting, Odin saw the Indian's face twist with spasms of pain.

It was Odin's chance. Only a fool would have hesitated. He jerked his right wrist free. The point of his knife came down, flashing quickly to the skin over the man's heart. It seemed to poise there for just a moment, and then it was driving all the way to the hilt through flesh and bone. The Indian shook, trembled violently, and was still.

Odin turned, throwing up his hand and stepping backward as if to ward off a blow. Reflected light was shining up from a round opening in

the rocks and a mumbling of voices was coming with it.

The last kill had been made within a yard of the pot hole.

CHAPTER IX

WILD MAN IN HELL

ODIN took time to recover his breath, and then slipped a pair of fine six-shooters out of the belt of the Indian he had just killed. The big war bonnet had fallen off during the fight. It had rolled clear, and fortunately was not injured. He picked it up, then found the blanket, whipping it around him.

After that he brought up the rest of the weapons and ammunition belts belonging to the two dead Indians down the ledge. He recovered his own rifle at the same time, and brought with it a heavy war hatchet he had found in one of the dead men's belt. He placed them all close to the mouth of the pot hole, and was ready for the real test.

All would be blood ahead of him now. He would fight through it in a very few moments or die in the attempt. There would be nothing halfway about it. There never was in a fight like this.

And even as he was placing his extra weapons, he heard Ann Green's voice shriek out in alarm down there in the hole. A belly-bursting roar of laughter followed. The girl was arguing in terror, her voice a wild scramble of hysterical words no one could understand, and in the midst of all Bud Whittaker's voice came to Odin.

"Oh, take it easy, little one! They're only having a little fun. You can't take your troubles to the Right and Wrong Committee here, sweetheart. You stand and take it. They know you belong to Jackson and that'll keep you from real harm!"

Odin waited no longer. With his own six-shooters shoved forward in his belts and the guns of the dead Indians in his hands, he whipped the blanket closer around him, concealing his hands in its folds. He stepped forward then, and started slowly down into the pot hole with the noise of the laughter and the girl's cries swirling around him.

It was smoky inside the pot hole in spite of the light. Odin was thankful for the smoke. The pot hole did not carry all of it away from the fires scattered through the huge, tunnel-like cavern. Most of it escaped through a hole overlooking the river, but there was enough of the smoke rising through the pot hole to partly cloud a man coming down the steep slope.

He gained the shadows of the group of Indians around the first fire, and leaned against the jagged wall of rock to his right. Bud Whittaker was there in front of him, but the man had his back to him, and it was here that the Indians and Whittaker were having their boisterous play with the girl.

Ann Green was on the other side of the fire from Whittaker. The girl's hands were behind her back. She was white-faced and helpless to all the wild outbursts of laughter, and she was constantly trying to dodge from side to side. Some buck had ripped the back of her dress to the waistline. She was having all she could do to keep the dress from slipping forward from her shoulders, and suddenly an Indian was reaching for it to give it a jerk.

It was the time for a man to start letting the red hell weep. At any instant Odin knew that his true identity would be discovered. There were several reds at the fire who would know him at a second glance. A sudden cry of alarm from either

one of them would bring the mob whirling upon him like devouring wolves.

"This way, Ann!"

He roared the words as he shook off the heavy war bonnet and flung aside the blanket. The guns in his hands lashed out, cracking the skulls of an Indian at either side of him, and then he was blazing the gashes of flame and lead into the startled mob.

"*This way, Ann!*"

He repeated his command, his voice lifting above the roaring of the guns. He saw the girl hesitate, saw her start forward, and Whittaker leap across the fire toward her. Odin tore the man down with a ball of lead before he could get his hands on the girl.

"It's Odin, Ann! *Hurry!*"

The girl started toward him again. Odin was still shooting. The fat was in the fire. The heavy roars of the guns seemed to shake the cavern and drown out all the startled wailing. But the girl was coming forward. Odin killed an Indian who reached for her. He killed another and another, a man going down for every shot.

Even a tenderfoot handling a gun for the first time would not have been able to miss a single shot in such a screeching and howling mob gone mad with surprise and terror!

Ann Green seemed to fly behind Odin once she got across the fire. He hurled the empty six-shooters at an Indian's head, and whipped his own heavy Colts into action. He could shoot at anything now, and he was still pouring it into the mob even as he was backing up the slope with the girl behind him. Then with a second pair of six-shooters suddenly emptied in his wild shooting, he whirled and ran, Ann at his side.

For the Indians were after them. The surprise was over. Running Wolf was shouting orders. The trick had become clear to him. With dead men all around him, others crying out in pain, and the odor of blood rising with the acrid bite of the blinding gun smoke, the chief sent his mobs of men rushing in a howling and shooting mass after the escaping pair.

NICE party you were having down there!" Odin told the girl that a few minutes after they had gained the rocks above the mouth of the pot hole and he had turned and poured the place full of bullets from a rifle. One slash of his blood-stained bowie had freed Ann Green's hands from behind her, and the bullets had driven back the rushing mob in the cavern, making them realize that it was as foolish for them to try to come out of the hole and at him as it would have been for them to climb up through the chimney of a house to attack a man on a roof. "I'm right worried. The Rights and Wrongs are going to have something to say about it."

"Don't be a fool, Fate!" She screamed that at him as she sat there rubbing her aching arms.

"Can't help it." He sent another bullet into the pot hole. "We unrighteous people are that way."

"Make it as hard as you can." She was sobbing bitterly. "That's the way of a man. I liked you the first time I saw you. Then . . . then the word got around about you and your men. They said you were always fighting, always killing men. A bloody butcher, Fate!"

"Comes in handy now, doesn't it!" He killed an Indian far down the slope in the moonlight. "Or would you have me lay down this rifle and apologize to the boys below?"

"Don't talk to me as though I were an imbecile, Fate." She tried to move closer to him, and her voice had grown desperately steady. "I've loved you for a long time. A woman doesn't love and forget, not if she's a real woman, Fate Odin!"

"Get back among the guns and ammunition before a bullet pops you!" he ordered. "You don't need to tell me pretty things just because you're in a jam and want out of it. Hell, you promised to be Jackson's wife! He told me so." He fired at another figure down the slope. "Nice couple you two would make."

"I told Jackson I would marry him, yes!" She reached out and tried to catch his arm, but he shook her hand away. "I told him that when he was sitting there all bandaged and could not very well ask me to kiss him—and I told him because I thought it might awaken something in you when you heard it!"

"It awoke something, all right." He took quick aim at something below, and fired. "I think it had something to do with getting your father killed—"

"No, it didn't, Fate!" Another sob broke from her. "Father was a fool, but he was an honest fool. They had to get him out of the way. Whittaker has told me about it. He never thought I would get away from those Indians. Father has sixty thousand dollars in coined gold and silver in his wagons. They want that. All the wagons that have disappeared from our train have been loaded with guns and ammunition for the Indians. They've paid for the guns in gold taken from a steamboat that was looted and burned on the Missouri last summer. We still have wagons in our train with false bottoms filled with guns. The Indians are to attack the train. Jackson and Bender Love will be in command. They wanted you away. They'll cut the train. The reds will hold the rest, and try to kill them all while Jackson and his wagons make the get-away."

"Is Jackson fool enough to think he can get away?" He looked at her with a scowl. "Soldiers would pick up his trail. They'd follow those wagons to hell and gone."

JACKSON knows that, Fate." Her voice had suddenly become quiet. "The Indians know it. The wagons will be the decoy. Jackson and his gang will escape with pack ponies to carry the gold and silver. The Indians will keep on with the wagons, driving them back into these wild hills as far as they can go. With scouts behind, they can burn them when the soldiers get too close. Oh, Fate, I know all their plans!"

"Wonderful!" He killed another Indian down the slope. "Only trouble is, I'm afraid you're missing a mighty good man in Jackson. I imagine he'd have taken you to Mexico."

"Fate," she tugged at his arm, making him miss a shot, "would you have wanted Jackson to take me away? Would you?"

"Sure!" he grinned. "That's why I sort of hate to break up his plans. He'd know how to handle a cat—with long claws."

"You're a devil, Fate Odin!" she cried. "I hate you. I only tried to make you jealous. I . . . I tried to make you see. Oh, I wanted to be loyal to my father. He doubted you all the way. He was in the sway of his crowd, and Jackson was playing him for all he was worth. But . . . but you don't hate me, do you, Fate? Be honest, please!"

"Hate you?" His face twisted into

a puzzled frown. "Well, no, I guess not. Listen, girl, we can't waste time. We're not out of this mess. Jackson may get you yet. Here, take this rifle. Keep shooting into that pot hole. We've got to do something, and we've got to do it damned fast!"

Odin had seen the danger. He had been expecting it. Indians were sneaking up a troughlike gash in the slope. From all the girl had told him, there were at least fifty of them in the cavern. Fully thirty reds were now climbing upward, taking advantage of rocks and brush. Bullets would not hold back that mob.

There was a large rock behind him that was almost as round as a cannon ball. He turned to it. For a moment it looked as if he would not be able to budge it. With every muscle straining, he finally felt it move. He kept straining. Bits of shale started grinding like breaking glass under the stone. It slipped a foot, a yard, then it was suddenly rolling. Odin guided it to the brink of the gash, and gave it a final push.

Disaster had begun. The heavy stone was like a juggernaut of destruction. Other rocks were torn loose. The noise of the crashing and smashing became a roar. Hundreds of other stones seemed to be tearing away. There were cries and yells from the Indians. The dust came swirling up, a blinding cloud for a moment blotting out the moonlight and leaving only that great thundering and the ringing lament of terror filling the night.

In the midst of all the noise, a shot crashed behind Odin. He whirled, and saw that Ann Green had killed her first Indian, a foolish young buck who had evidently disobeyed orders and was trying to come up through the pot hole.

PINK MORGAN watched it from the head of the ravine. Every flash of light from the top of the cliff was like a message from the sky. Cold balls of perspiration rolled down his face. He paced nervously. Once he started forward, impelled by a tremendous desire to get closer and take a hand in that raging battle. Then he halted, shrugging helplessly.

"Here I stand," he whispered, bitterly. "A stockholder in the show, not doin' a lick to help."

Go for help! That thought came to him dozens of times, but it vanished as quickly as it came. An army would do but little good against the Cliff of the Winds. It had been tried when old Crazy Eagle made his stand-off there.

For hours the fight dragged on, sometimes furious, sometimes dying so nearly away it looked like the end of everything had come. Morgan's hopes brightened, died away, and became desperate. He caught himself going forward a dozen times.

"But I can't," he growled each time. "Here I've got to wait. He may cut through, an' I'd be gone. Then he'd have to wait for me or worry his head off about what had happened to me."

So he kept pacing. His jumpy nerves would not let him stop it. Toward dawn, he halted, standing there in the damp shadows on the brink of the ravine, his eyes widening.

A light was beginning to glow in the north. Morgan studied it intently. The glare grew higher and brighter against the sky. Finally his head bobbed in a knowing nod.

"It's the train now," he grunted. "The reds are hittin' it hard, an' they've somehow touched fire to some of the wagons or somebody in the train has fired 'em. I—"

He cut himself short, his hands flying to the butts of the heavy six-shooters in his belts. An instant later his eyes were popping.

The weary forms of a man and a woman were coming out of the shadows. Morgan took one good look at them. A word formed on his lips. By an effort that almost choked him, he kept it from being a ringing shout that would have been heard five hundred yards away.

"*Fate!*"

"Well, how'd you guess it!" grinned Odin. "Here we are, not so very much worse for the wear and tear."

"But . . . but," gasped Morgan, "there's still shootin' breakin' out up there ever' now an' then!"

"A log full of punk burns slowly, Pink," explained Odin. "We found a nice one. It didn't take much figuring for the rest. I scattered three boxes of cartridges in it and lighted the punk in a few places. The heat explodes the cartridges when it gets to them. The explosions sound like shots. That keeps the Indians thinking we're still up there."

"Well, I'll be damned!" said Morgan.

"Please hurry!" Ann Green kept pleading. She rode behind Odin as they worked their way northward through the ravines. "Our whole wagon train must be afire."

"The wagon train isn't afire." There was a strange hint of satisfaction in Odin's voice. "Your mother isn't in the main train, either. She's not in what was the main train, which is with my train. That glare of a fire you see comes from a pine thicket above my train. It means that the big train has been broken during the night. It means also that Jeff Oakland and Hank Stone have executed a very neat little deal—one that must have pleased Jackson immensely."

"What are yuh talkin' about, Fate?" demanded Morgan.

"For once, Pink, I didn't let you in on all of a secret." Odin looked at him with a smile. "My deal was made with the dead."

"Say," Morgan looked at him searchingly, "yuh didn't get hit on the head with somethin' in that fight on the cliff, didja?"

"Maybe just kicked with a mule before I was born." Odin was still smiling. He was like a man with the only key to a great mystery, one he was enjoying for the moment. "When Ben Dwight came to my camp to report Green's death, he had found out the wagon in which Green was carrying his gold and silver. The rest of the things in that particular wagon did not matter. My men and Dwight's men have taken that gold and silver, leaving the wagon behind as bait for Jackson. One of Dwight's wagons was also left, but the big freighter he always insisted on driving over the rough places. Very few in the train know that wagon was loaded with dynamite for a mining company at the head of the Ruby."

"But I still don't see the point," frowned Morgan when Odin came to a halt in his story. "Don't be so damned mysterious, Fate!" He took off his hat, scratching his head. "Dynamite? Gold an' silver? Wagons left for Jackson? Nope," he shook his head violently, "I don't get it at all."

"You will. All good things come to those who wait—especially, Pink, if they have the patience to take the hammerings and batterings life sometimes gives." Odin laughed softly. "He who waits long and suffers much can sometimes drown his devils in their own blood."

THEY were riding as rapidly as they could. At times Morgan swung on ahead to inspect dangerous spots. The miles seemed to drag past before they came within sound of the incessant crash and roll of gunfire ahead of them. Now they swung abruptly to the right, heading toward a rimrocked rise covered with heavy pines. When they reached the high top of it, the fighting wagon trains were suddenly in sight a mile away.

"Look!" exclaimed the girl. "The fire in that thicket of pines has about gone out, but one of the wagons in the lower circle is afire."

"It's all just as it should be—exactly," nodded Odin with his eyes studying everything ahead of them. "Jackson and his gang stand alone. All the good people are in the clear. Jackson has found out by this time that the money's gone. He's probably fool enough to think he can recover it, but he never will."

"Look," whispered the girl, barely listening to what he was saying. "Just look at the Indians. They're all fighting for Jackson. His wagon circle is filled to overflowing with them!"

"And more and more all around him." Odin's voice was a strange whisper that seemed to be talking only to himself. "No more guns will leave Jackson to fill the hands of a savage people who scalp our women and even our children. I've seen too much of it, bodies mutilated, naked women pinned on sharpened stakes driven in the ground; I've heard the wolves howl too often over the dead—"

"I see it all now," cut in Morgan hoarsely. "It's old Ben Dwight's biggest wagon what's afire. Its driver must've sided with Jackson at first, then slipped away when his chance came. I—"

A terrible explosion filled the valley, rocking it from end to end and leaving it trembling like an earthquake. The flaming wagon in Jackson's circle vanished into bits of fire flying everywhere under a great, billowing sheet of flame and white smoke leaping skyward. Feathered mobs of men disappeared with it, and only death and destruction lay at every hand.

"A clean wipe-out!" cried Morgan, slamming his spurs to his horse. "Watch our bunch come out o' our train! Watch the hosses an' men come for the charge to kill the few stragglers. *Yee-yo-ooo!* Eat 'em alive, boys, eat 'em alive!"

He was gone then, gone to join the horses and men still pouring out of the upper circle. Soon the valley was ringing with the flying pound of hoofs, the yelling of men and the scattering bursts of shots.

"And the dead has spoken." Odin had not moved. He was still talking in that strange tone as if to someone whose unseen spirit stood beside him. "All the credit belongs to Ben. From now on we will have no more fighting. From now on—"

"Fate!" A sob came from the girl behind him. Her hands clutched desperately into his shoulders. "Please . . . please tell me—"

"Hush, Ann," he whispered, suddenly turning in his saddle. "This is no time for words."

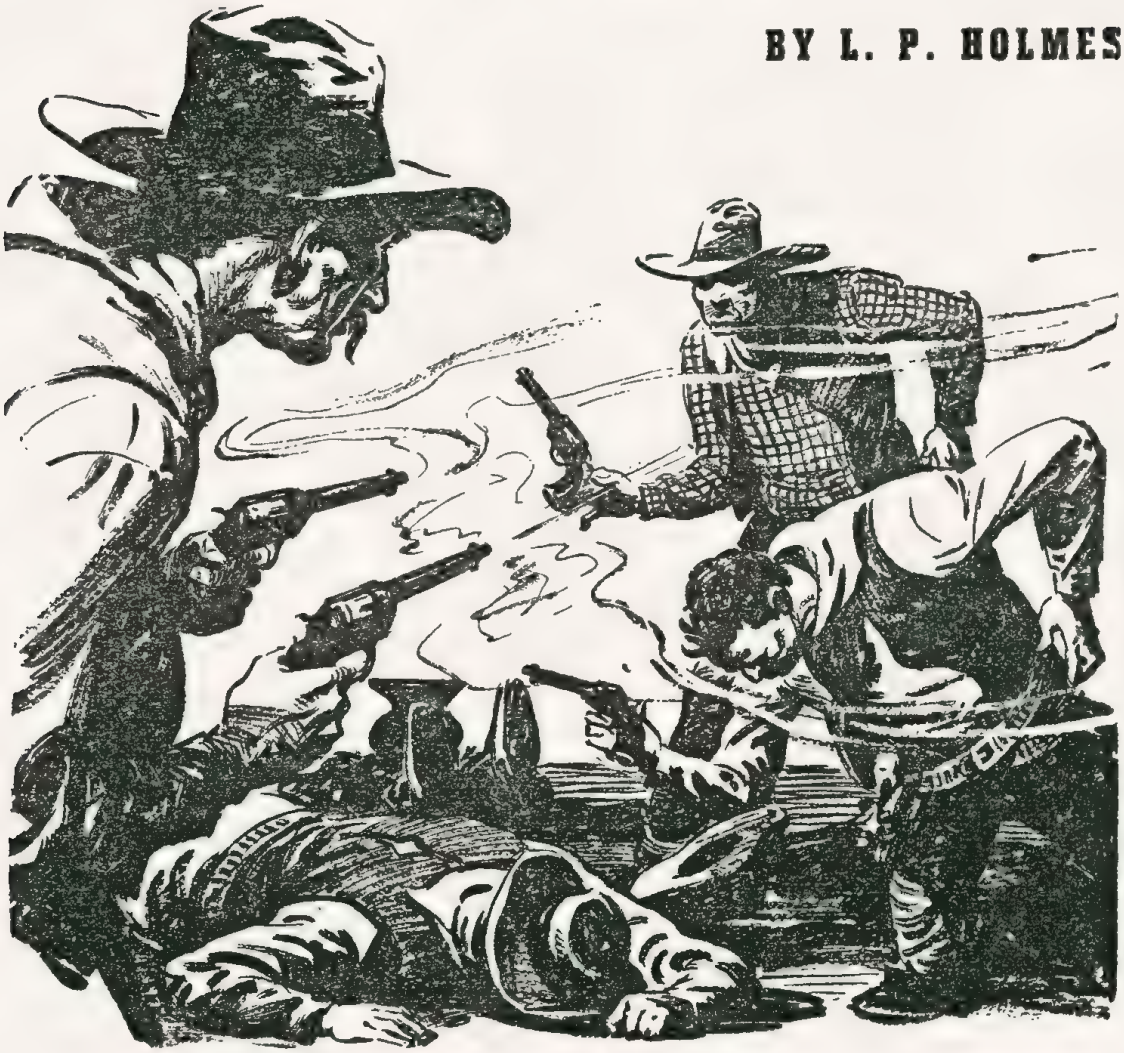
He swung her quickly from behind him and across the saddle and his lap. For a minute he held her there, looking down into the sparkling pools of her tear-filled eyes, Suddenly he was pressing her to him, her wet cheek against his cheek.

"The good comes," he whispered tenderly, "to all those who wait."

THE END.

SIX-GUN SEND-OFF

BY L. P. HOLMES



THEY WERE rounding up in the Chinquapin Basin and Ared White needed an extra hand to help young Bucky Stent hold down the line camp cabin in Modoc Pass. Round-up in Chinquapin always meant that a lot of the wilder cattle would try to drift out through Modoc Pass, which meant a night and day job in the pass until the press of work was over. Ared White always threw two waddies into the pass during round-up, for he didn't expect night and day work of any man. So he took on a wrinkled, leathery old drifter and sent him up to the line camp with Bucky. That was the way Mesa came to the Looping W.

Mesa was the only name he gave, which suited White and suited Bucky Stent, too. A taciturn sort, this fellow, Mesa. His voice was soft, mild. In his faded shirt, patched jeans, run-over boots, he bore a marked resemblance to a grizzled old pack rat. His pony was a shaggy broom tail, his saddle almost black from long use. His war-bag was weather-stained and meager of content. He wore neither chaps

or spurs and he carried no gun. He looked like a rundown, shiftless old grub-line drifter and that was what Ared White and the rest of the outfit took him to be. But up at the line camp, Bucky Stent soon found out different. This old fellow, Mesa, was a hand, in any company. And deep in those mild, sun-puckered eyes was a spark which Bucky was quick to understand and respect.

And so it was that when Johnny Silver had a bronc go tangle-footed on him during the roundup, an occurrence which left Johnny facing a long spell in bed with a broken leg, Bucky went to Ared White with an eager recommendation that Mesa be taken on permanently.

"I tell you, boss, old Mesa is as good a buckaroo as ever sat a saddle," Bucky said earnestly. "I know he looks old and sort of worn around the edges, but he's tough as whang leather. He's the best hand with a rope I ever saw and he savvies broncs and cattle like nobody's business. I saw him fit a cold shoe on a bronc up at the pass and make a perfect job of it. And he cooks the best grub I ever ate. He's quiet and willing and a four-square man, any way you take him. Give him a try, boss, and if he don't prove all I claim in a month, why then you can fire me right along with him."

Ared White, feeling good over the big increase the basin roundup had shown, agreed. And Mesa moved his scanty warbag into the regular Looping W bunkhouse and settled down to a steady job. Within ten days Ared White took Bucky aside and said, "you were right about Mesa, Bucky. He'll do."

Mesa knew whom he had to thank for this steady job. He did not say anything, but at odd times, after some judicious currying and brushing of different animals in the cavvy corral, he worked with cunningly twisted and braided horse hair and came up with a beautifully-fashioned bridle which he hung on Bucky's saddlehorn with a terse statement: "Yores, kid."

Later, when Ared White's slim bright-faced daughter, Paula, saw Bucky's new bridle and exclaimed in envy, Mesa went to work again. When Paula's twentieth birthday came, there was a horse-hair bridle among her other gifts. The warm-hearted girl gave Mesa a delighted hug and dropped a kiss on his furrowed cheek. From that time on, whenever Mesa looked at Paula White, there was a light in his eyes which never dimmed, an adoring, worshipful light, like that of a dog for its master. And Paula, understanding, made a confidant and pal of the old cowboy.

IT was ridiculous on the part of Rip Tolman to resent this. But that was the kind of man he was. Big, powerful, swaggering Rip Tolman was easily the best bronc twister in the crew, arrogant and egotistical and as sure of himself with women as he was with horses. Tolman had let it be known among the crew that whenever Paula White needed an escort to a dance in Modoc City, or a companion on a day's fishing trip back in the Sundown Hills, he was the favored man.

The rest of the crew did not overlook their opportunity to rawhide him when Paula went fishing one day with Mesa and Bucky. They kidded him, telling him that Mesa had beaten his time with Paula. That night, in the bunkhouse, Tolman hit back.

"You know, Bib," he said to Bib Scoville, his closest friend in the outfit, "where all the best horse-hair bridles and ropes come from? They

come out of the big house at Yuma. Why, I've had fellers tell me that some of the flossiest horse-hair work ever seen, is turned out by those convicts down there. Be a good place to learn how, for a fact."

Bib Scoville did not answer. He just got red around the ears and flashed a wary look at old Mesa. The rest of the bunkhouse grew dead still. Then Bucky Stent bounced to his feet, his eyes flashing. He had glimpsed the slight involuntary flinch which Mesa had given at Tolman's words.

"Tolman," said Bucky, "I always had you figured as a hombre that's two big for his Stetson. Now I know I've been right. Why don't you try making a crack like that at somebody nearer yore own age and size? Me, for instance."

Tolman didn't make any answer. He just whirled and hit Bucky, knocking him flat. But Bucky didn't stay down. He came up, raging, his mouth and chin bloody. And he tore into Rip Tolman like a wild cat.

It was a good, even scrap. Bucky knocked Tolman down twice, and took another trip to the floor himself. They were both pretty badly cut up when Ared White, hearing the racket, came down from the main ranchhouse and put a stop to the fight.

White was plenty mad himself. One of his strongest tenets as a successful cattleman was that his crew should get along, like one big happy family. Fighting between members of the Looping W crew was strictly taboo. He gave both Bucky and Tolman a tongue-lashing, ending up with the threat of firing both of them if the quarrel didn't stop, then and there. After which, he drew his foreman, Jim Steele, aside to get the facts about what started the ruckus.

He swore harshly when Jim told him. "Tolman is getting too high and mighty," he snorted. "I don't mind admitting that I've often wondered about what was behind old Mesa. Most generally, when a man gives himself that kind of a name, it's because he's not exactly proud of his real moniker. Just the same, I don't give a whoop. All I ask of any man is that he get along with the rest of the crew and that he gives me a fair, faithful day of work for his wages. If he does that, I don't give a damn if he's Charley Yakima, with five thousand dollars on his head. Mesa is all right. He does his job and does it well. And he's like a faithful old watch dog where Paula is concerned. For that matter, Paula thinks the world of the old cuss."

"She's got nothing on us boys," drawled Jim Steele. "We all are kind o' fond of him, except Tolman —and maybe Scoville. I don't mind telling you, boss, I'm going to shake hands with Bucky. If he hadn't called Tolman, me or one of the other boys would have."

Ared White grunted. "Now that I know, I feel the same way, Jim. But I don't dast do it, else Bucky would go rampaging again. I can't afford to take sides. But from now on out, I'm going to watch Tolman. If he don't walk the chalk line, he gets his time."

WHEN Bucky went out to the well to wash up his bruised, cut face, old Mesa was there to pump the water for him.

"You shouldn't have stepped in, kid," said the old fellow gently. "Not that I don't appreciate it, of course. But it wasn't worth getting punched around for. I don't care what Tolman says. He runs a lot to mouth, anyway you look at him."

Word of the trouble got to Paula

White. Maybe her father told her. At any rate, when a dance came up ten days later in Modoc City, and Tolman asked her to go with him, she turned him down flat, and went with Bucky Stent, instead.

The moment Bucky and Paula drove away in the Looping W buckboard, Tolman and Bib Scoville sought out Ared White and demanded their time. After which they rode to town, liquored up a bit and went to the dance. They caught Bucky as he went outside for a smoke while Paula was dancing with Tommy Kirk of the U P Cross.

Bucky was no mean scrapper himself, when he got started, but two to one was a little too much for him. His two opponents had him pretty badly beaten up before Tommy Kirk, hearing what was happening, broke off his dance with Paula, raced outside and took Bib Scoville apart in fine style. With the odds evened, Bucky really went after Rip Tolman and whipped him to a standstill.

It spoiled the evening for Paula, of course. She had to drive home, for Bucky's eyes were both swollen shut. But she took Bucky into the ranchhouse, got hold of Mesa, and the two of them worked over Bucky until he was not quite a gargoyle.

The next morning, Paula told her father all about it. "Now, don't you jump on Bucky," she warned. "He couldn't help it. Those two cowards ganged him. And," she ended fiercely, "if Rip Tolman or Bib Scoville ever set foot on this ranch again, I'll take a horse whip to them."

Ared White was quietly furious. A proud man, he regretted Paula's part in the affair, though he admitted that it was neither her fault, nor Bucky's. But to himself, he promised worse than a horse whipping for Rip Tolman and Bib Scoville if either of the two ever came around again.

But things were tranquil, after that. Tolman and Scoville dropped out of sight completely. The weeks went by and became months. Old Mesa had become an integral part of the ranch by now. With his first pay he bought a new shirt, new jeans, new boots. In his quiet way, he got as much work done as any rider in the outfit. And he always found time to do odd favors for Paula White, washing and soaping her saddle regularly, caring for her little string of riding ponies, brushing and currying them until they shone sleek in the sun.

Now and then he entered into bunkhouse discussion, always speaking quietly and slowly and with such real knowledge and authority, the younger members listened with respect. He became increasingly popular with the crew, this strange leathery little man with the soft voice and that strange spark far back in his sun-puckered eyes. And while the other riders always carried guns as a matter of habit, Mesa never did. If he had any favorite among the riders, it was Bucky Stent. And every time he saw Bucky and Paula White together, he would watch them with a sort of quiet satisfaction.

The fact that Bucky and Paula seemed to find more and more pleasure in each other's company, was noted by everyone on the ranch, including Ared White. At first the ranch owner seemed a little disconcerted over this and none too pleased. And one day when Bucky and Paula headed out on a ride to town together and Ared White stood on the ranchhouse porch watching them, a frown on his square-cut face, Mesa came shuffling up to him.

Mesa built and lighted a cigarette,

inhaling deeply. "Bucky," he said slowly, "is a good boy. No money, of course, except what he draws as wages. Yet, was I in yore place, Ared, I'd rate a man a heap like I would a bronc. Whether he was honest—and sound. The real permanent things in life ain't rated on money. They're rated on character. Yeah, Bucky is a good boy."

Ared White looked at the old puncher, then nodded, his face clearing. "You're right, Mesa," he admitted. "I hadn't thought of things exactly from that angle, but you're right. Bucky is a good kid, solid and dependable. And, come to think about it, I always swore I'd let Paula make her own choice, regardless. Once, when I was young, I knew a girl whose parents tried to steer her in her choice of a husband. They had the local banker's son picked. But the girl ended up by running off and marrying a regular cowhand. The two kids had tough sledding for a time, but they found happiness. And after that, success. And that cowhand would never have amounted to shucks if it hadn't been for the girl he married."

"I always figured that Paula's mother must have been plenty real," Mesa said quietly. "Else she would never have had a daughter like Paula. And the banker's son?"

"He ended up a tramp when his father refused to dish him out any more money."

"You're a plenty wise father," murmured Mesa.

"You're not exactly a dumb old codger, yoreself," chuckled Ared White, giving the old rider a slap on the shoulder.

THE seasons moved along. With each passing day Mesa seemed to find a deeper satisfaction in life. It was as though, after innumerable wasted, lonely years, he had found the niche in life he had always craved. Work to do, friends to chin comfortably with in the bunkhouse —and someone to worship—Paula White.

The growing bond between Paula and Bucky Stent afforded him the keenest satisfaction of all. It was as though, in the budding romance he was vicariously living some part of life he had never known.

And then one day word reached the ranch that Rip Tolman and Bib Scoville had shown up again in Modoc City, accompanied by a couple of other hard-faced, hard-drinking riders. They all appeared plentifully supplied with money. In no time at all, they had made public nuisances of themselves, drinking, swaggering, boasting, fighting.

When angry citizens suggested that the town marshal run them out, and the marshal tried, they beat him terribly and over drawn guns dared anyone to take on where the law officer left off. Modoc City had known wild days, tough days in the past. But that spirit had faded with the years and now the town hesitated about daring those threatening guns. So Rip Tolman and his crowd stayed on, more boisterous and troublesome than ever.

They took a special delight in rawhiding any of the Looping W who showed up in town. Inevitably, this ended in trouble. There was that night when Jim Steele and Harvey Stone stood all they could of it, then turned on Tolman and the others. It was a terrific battle which ended up with Steele getting a dislocated shoulder and Harvey Stone a near-concussion from a smash over the head with a gun barrel.

Ared White had his hands full, keeping the rest of the crew from

riding to town and cleaning up the renegades, once and for all.

"Nothing doing, boys," White told them sternly. "It would be certain to end up in shooting. And those whelps aren't worth any of you boys getting shot up over. We'll just stay to home and mind our own business. After all, it isn't our chore to police Modoc City. And that gang will end up snarled in their own ropes, first thing they know."

With the passing days, however, it began to look as though Modoc City had lost its nerve completely. The renegades stayed on, raising more hell and getting away with it. Even when they shot up a bartender who argued with them about payment for liquor, nothing concrete was done. There was plenty of talk among the citizens of Modoc City, but no one wanted to take the lead in a movement to clean the town. For by this time, it was apparent that Tolman and his gang would just as soon throw lead as fists.

Then one day Paula White rode alone to visit the wife of Chuck Trowbridge, who owned the range south of the Looping W. Inasmuch as Tolman and his crowd had so far shown no inclination to leave the limits of town, Ared White had felt that it was safe for his daughter to ride over to the Trowbridge ranch alone.

But when she came spurring home, just before sundown her face was flushed, her clear eyes misted with angry, indignant tears, one sleeve of her blouse torn completely off.

She sobbed out her story in her father's arms. She had been on her way home when she had bumped squarely into Rip Tolman, riding alone. He was ugly with hate and drink. His words had been slurring and insulting, his actions more so. He had grabbed at her, tried to pull her from the saddle. But she had freed herself by slashing him across the face with her quirt, though his clawing fingers had ripped away the sleeve of her blouse. And then her pony had outrun his bronc. He had given up the chase, half a mile from the Looping W.

When Paula finished her story, Ared White had a savage set to his jaw. Only his long habit of cool practicality kept him from heading for town, then and there. The crew was insistent that he let them head for town and clean up, but he held them back.

"The job has got to be done," he admitted. "But as I said before, I won't waste the life of a good man cleaning out a den of coyotes. The best and safest way for all concerned, is to face that bunch with a show of force that they don't dare argue against. Tomorrow I aim to have a talke with Chuck Trowbridge and Ernie Lane. If they agree, and I know they will, our three outfits will go to town in a bunch. Don't get me wrong, boys, I'm not afraid of those renegade skunks. But I don't believe in gunplay unless it's the last refuge; and as I said, I don't want any good man to lose his life over this. We face those rats with twenty men and they won't dare draw a gun. We'll float them off this range and they won't come back. That's the way it will be."

The Looping W boys did plenty of arguing over the matter. They were mad clear through. But they knew better than to disobey Ared White.

OF all of them, queerly enough, Bucky Stent had the least to say. But his very silence was ominous. And there were little white lines of repression, reaching out from

his nostrils to bracket the corners of his tight-drawn lips.

Old Mesa, reading the signs more shrewdly than the rest, cautioned Bucky.

"I know just how you feel, kid," said the old fellow. "But the boss is right. I've lived a lot longer than you and I've seen plenty of life. Gunplay is dirty business. It has solved plenty of problems, all right. But no matter how a shoot-out ends, the cost is always too high. You quiet down. Ared White has the right idea. That way we can get rid of those coyotes just as satisfactory as if we shot 'em in half."

Bucky said nothing, but he turned in early that night. And Mesa went to bed feeling that he had won the argument.

When Mesa awakened, sometime later, the bunkhouse was still and dark. Yet, the very thing which had awakened him, a subconscious warning of some sort, made him get softly from his blankets, cross to Bucky Stent's bunk and lay a hand on the tumbled blankets. Bucky wasn't there!

Carrying his boots, Mesa went outside, pulled on the footwear, then hurried to the saddle shed. A scratched match showed him that Bucky's saddle wasn't on the pole. And then Mesa knew. Bucky Stent had slipped away to have it out with Rip Tolman.

Mesa went straight to the main house, knocked until he had roused Ared White. Briefly, he told what he had found out. White was angry.

"The young fool!" he raged. "He'll go get himself killed. I'll give him hell for this. He went against my orders, and I won't stand that from any man who draws wages from me, regardless of who he is. I'll fire him in—"

"No, you won't, Ared," cut in Mesa. "You can't blame the kid too much. Just figure what you'd have done were you his age and feeling about a girl like he does Paula. You'd have put on the war paint, too. But what we got to do is get to town, pronto, and back his hand, regardless. Maybe we'll be in time and maybe," his voice seemed to catch slightly, "maybe we won't. It's near midnight. He's been gone some time."

"You're right!" the ranch owner declared. "Get the crew up and have 'em saddle a bronc for me. I'll be down in a jiffy."

Mesa scurried back to the bunkhouse and roused the crew. In thin, jerky sentences he told them what was in the air. They dressed, grabbed guns and headed for the cavvy corral at a run. Ared White came down, buckling on a pair of guns. And they were just about ready to start when they heard the shuffle of hoofs, coming in from the town trail.

"Bucky," yelled White, "is that you?"

"I got Bucky here," said a worried voice. "But he can't hear you, Ared. He passed out on me a couple of miles back and I had to tie him in his saddle. Better get to work on him. He's carrying two slugs."

DAYLIGHT was a long time in coming for the Looping W. A couple of the men carried Bucky up to the main house and got him between blankets. Tommy Kirk, who had brought him home, had told the truth. One slug had hit Bucky low down on the left side, skidded along a rib and emerged not two inches from his spine. The other one was high up in the right chest.

"Doc Summers was out of town," Tommy Kirk told Ared White.

"Else I'd have taken Bucky to his place."

Paula heard the noise of confusion and came into the room, wrapped in a dressing gown. At sight of Bucky lying there, still and bloody, she gave a heartbroken little cry and darted to him. For a moment, she held his head in her arms, sobbing. Then she straightened up, wiped the tears from her eyes and gave orders in a tight voice that showed her effect to control her fear. Water was heated and brought to her, clean cloths, bandages. She washed and cleansed the bullet holes and put bandages in place. And before she had finished, Bucky moaned softly, then opened his eyes.

He managed a twisted grin, "Don't worry, honey," he whispered. "I'll be all right. Reckon I was a fool . . . trying it alone. But they got me . . . by surprise. I'll be all right."

In the gray light of dawn, Tommy Kirk told how it happened. How Bucky had walked into the saloon where Rip Tolman and the other renegades were, and how he had called Tolman and dared him to go for his guns.

"One of those polecats—I've heard him called Brock by the others—was at the end of the bar near the door," ended Tommy. "Bucky wasn't watching him and damned if the yellow pup didn't draw and shoot, trying to get Bucky in the back. How he did it, I don't know, but Brock missed. And then, when Bucky looked that way, Tolman and Scoville both cut down on him. Next minute, Jing Ellis up and threw a chair at the hanging lamp. He smashed it.

"I knew that Bucky had been hit. In the racket and the dark, I got hold of him and helped him outside. He insisted on coming home. I didn't know how bad he was hit at the time and he said it wasn't much. But he passed out on the way home. That's all."

"No!" said Mesa, with a queer, ominous note in his voice. "Not all. Just the beginning."

The wrinkled, leathery old man headed for the bunkhouse, an unaccustomed deftness in his stride. The rest of the crew, startled, followed him. Ared White hurried down to the bunkhouse himself.

When he stamped in he saw a strange sight. Mesa had pulled his battered old warbag from under his bunk. He was reaching into it and now he brought into sight a bundle of wrapped gun belts. He shook these out to show two big, black-butted guns in the holsters. With quick, deft jerks he strapped the belts about his lank waist. Thongs dangled from the bottoms of the holsters and these he knotted about his legs, tying down the holsters.

"Lay off that, Mesa," White said. sharply. "No more of these one-man vendettas. Lay off, I say!"

Mesa looked up. The spark that had always been far back in his eyes, shone bright and hard. "You can't stop me, Ared," he said quietly. "Don't try. Say I'm fired—or that I've quit. But I've had enough. They insult and maul my little girl, Paula. They gun my kid, Bucky. Well—they've asked for it. Oh, don't look at me like that, Ared. I say Paula is my girl and Bucky my boy. Somehow, that's the way I've come to feel about those two youngsters.

There was an odd wistfulness in his voice as he continued, "Get me right. I've been happy working on this spread—happier than I ever was before in my life. Here I found the one thing I'd been trying to find all my life, and never quite reached. I

found honest, good work. I found good men to ride with, to be bunkies with. I found that at last I had been able to put loneliness behind me. I found that I could get so far away from the old name, I could almost forget it. Almost. But I'm remembering it now. And—"

"Don't be a fool!" cut in Ared White. "You won't have a chance alone. Four to one!"

Mesa laughed, a hard, barking sort of laugh. "I'll have chance enough, Ared—all I'll need. You've never known me as anything but Mesa. Do you know who I really am? I'll tell you. That time Tolman made that crack about convicts and horsehair bridles, he was right. I've been in Yuma. They'd hot-foot it to get me and put me back behind bars again, if they knew where I was. Don't worry about me and odds. Odds really never did worry Charley Yakima."

He pushed past Ared White and headed for the group of saddled horses which still stood by the cavvy corral.

White, stunned, aghast, was like a man paralyzed. The rest of the crew were the same. And not until the fading pound of speeding hoofs sounded, did White move.

"Yakima! Charley Yakima! One of the wildest— Mesa!"

"What of it?" growled Jim Steele, his arm still in a sling. "He's all man in my book. And he'll maybe need help. I'm riding, boss."

"We're all riding," growled White. "Come on!"

WITH canny judgement, Mesa had picked the fastest horse on the ranch. And he hammered out the miles to Modoc City in a grim, frozen-faced silence. He knew what he was going to do, knew it all too well. And he knew the price he would have to pay. Even if he came out of this thing with a whole skin, his secret was no longer a secret. So he'd have to hit the lonely trail again.

And the chances were all against him making a clean getaway this time. He had hidden his trail once, but now that trail would open up fresh and strong again. And he was older than he used to be. And tired. The haven of security and contentment he had found at the Looping W was behind him now. And Paula and Bucky, the two kids he adored, because they represented something in life he had never been fortunate enough to know. Well, there was one satisfaction. This, that he was about to do was for them. Yes, he'd get a real, satisfaction in knowing that. He wouldn't mind paying the price—for them.

The sun was coming up when he pounded into Modoc City. He knew that White and the other boys would be coming in after him. He knew they weren't coming after Charley Yakima, and that five-thousand-dollar reward. That thought wouldn't be in their minds at all. They'd be coming to back his hand.

And he didn't want them to. This was his chore. As long as he had to pay the big price, he wanted to run it alone. He'd have to be fast. He'd have to locate Tolman and those other whelps before the Looping W outfit arrived.

It was pretty early in the morning. Tolman and the rest would probably be sleeping off the night before. He'd have to find out where they slept. The barkeep in the big saloon might know.

Mesa swept his mount to a stop at a hitch rail and swung down. He let his hands play over the worm butts of the big guns, loosening the

weapons slightly in the leather. His hands were tingling, sure. Funny how there was some things, once learned, that a man never forgot. Like gun speed, for instance.

He walked into the saloon, then stopped, dead still. Four men were at the bar. He saw, as they looked at him that their eyes were drawn and bloodshot, as though they hadn't slept at all. Mesa understood and smiled thinly. His voice, cold and almost soft, cut clearly through the room.

"Didn't dare hit the hay, eh, Tolman? Kind of figured, when you whip sawed Bucky Stent that you might have pushed yore luck a little far. And you were afraid if you went to sleep, you'd wake up with a rope around yore necks. Yet you were going to try and make yore bluff stick—make it stand up. You wouldn't run, because you had to prove to yoreself and to others, that you were a flock of woolly wolves. But all the time you knew, deep down, that the wolves were just mangy coyotes, after all. So you didn't dare sleep. Well, either way, the whole thing ends here. In just ten seconds I go for my guns!"

They swung away from the bar, the four of them, moving into a little semicircle about him. A hot cruelty and anticipation was in their watchful eyes. This little, dried-up boot of a man, with those two big guns. This old drifter who had taken on with the Looping W. He was calling them—the four of them—making six-gun talk. After this, the town would walk a chalk line when they were around.

"You pitiful old fool," sneered Rip Tolman. "As though—"

"Time's up!" Mesa said crisply.

Bib Scoville never knew what hit him. Scoville had been the one to sneak a draw on Bucky Stent. He was trying it now, on Mesa. And at the blast of Mesa's first roaring shot, Bib Scoville died, before he hit the floor.

And then it was the squat, swarthy one on Tolman's left. He had the look of being gun wise, the way he carried his weapons. And it took two smashing slugs through that squat body to start it toward the floor, limp and shuddering.

The lanky one, farthest from the bar, got it next, heart high and center, for he had his guns clear. They smoked as he fell, driving two futile slugs into the floor.

AND then there was only Rip Tolman left, his mouth open, his face stiff with terror. He was making queer, gulping sounds as he clawed madly for his guns. As Tolman got his right-hand gun free, Mesa broke his wrist and the weapon clattered to the floor. And then, with a savage hunch of his shoulders, Mesa literally pounded Tolman back and down in a thundering cacophony of smashing lead.

The room grew still, except for the whistling fright in the throat of the stunned bartender, who apparently had to cling to the bar to keep from falling.

Mesa waved his reeking guns at those four still figures on the floor. "The town can have 'em, now," he declared. "Tell 'em they're a present from—"

The bartender did not get the last two words, for the pound of tearing hoofs came to a crashing stop outside the place. And then Ared White and the Looping W boys were rushing in.

They stopped, staring at Mesa, at the dead men, then at Mesa again. The old man smiled thinly. "Did you

say something about odds, Ared?" he murmured. "Well, they weren't wolves—just coyotes. I tried to tell that barkeep yonder that the town could consider them a present from—"

"Shut up!" White broke in grimly. "You ain't said a word. Go outside with the boys and keep yore mouth shut. I'll tend to the rest of this, make the necessary explanation."

Jim Steele and Tommy Kirk caught Mesa by the elbows and led him outside. He didn't struggle. They had him. They had Charley Yakima. Well, he didn't really care.

They kept him apart from the crowd which gathered. And later, when Ared White came over to them, Mesa listened a little stupidly.

"A good job, well done, from all I hear," growled White. "They don't know how you did it, but they're glad you did. The barkeep can't remember nothing, he was that scared. Now we're going home and forget our troubles."

"No!" protested Mesa. "You don't understand. I got to move on. They'll be after me."

"Who'll be after you?" asked White impatiently. "Why should anybody be after a dried-up little wart like you?"

"They're after Charley Yakima and I'm him. And—"

"You're a liar by the clock," grinned Jim Steele.

"That's right," Tommy Kirk chimed in. "Just the lyingest old coot in five States. Mesa you've been, Mesa you'll always be. Ain't that right, boys?"

The other Looping W riders nodded, grinning.

"Chances are, Paula will need you to give her a hand getting Bucky back into shape," said Ared White.

Mesa was still dazed when they put him in his saddle. He was just coming out of it when they were a couple of miles from town, with nothing around or near them but the open, smiling range.

And about then Mesa began to understand. These bunk pards of his—they knew, all right. But they'd never tell, never. Wild horses wouldn't be able to drag it out of them. His secret was buried deep in the hearts of men who knew how to be steadfast and loyal. The trail was still hidden; it always would be. And now they were going home!

THE END.

Once a Red River wagon was loaded with furs and supplies, it was unnecessary to unpack and repack at each camp site—a great advantage to traders who often had to flee from marauding Indians.

THE STORY OF THE WEST

told in pictures and text by

GERARD DELANO

Many of the famous early trappers reaped a rich harvest of furs from the streams and rivers of the Southwest. To these dauntless self-appointed explorers the twists and turns of the Gila, the Pecos, the Canadian and the Arkansas Rivers became like well-thumbed pages of familiar books.

Many tributaries of the Arkansas River were first named by the French. Others more westerly bore Spanish names. The Cimarron, tributary to the Arkansas from the west, is a Spanish-American name meaning "something wild, runaway or unreclaimed." The Canadian, main fork of the Arkansas, is from the Spanish "Rio Canada" meaning "river of precipitous walls."

Furs were transported by canoe as far as practicable, then carried overland by pack horses or mules. Later, in the period of 1826 to 1836, it became customary to carry the furs in two-wheeled carts called Red River wagons. These wagons accommodated close to half a ton of furs, traps and other duffle and offered the big advantage that, once packed, it was unnecessary to unpack and repack at each camp site along the return route.

The Pawnees, Kiowas and Comanches, always a lurking menace, frequently added a dash of paprika to the otherwise and already well-seasoned dish of adventure on which these men thrived. Nor were the Indians the only hazard.

The wily Armijo, governor of New Mexico, was another constant threat to the prosperity of the trappers. Many there were who toiled long and arduously at their traps through an entire season, braving the hostile bands of redskins and the peril of their fatal arrows only to have their hard-won furs captured and confiscated by the agents of the grasping Armijo.

William Sublette, famous already by reason of his work with the Rocky Mountain Fur Co. in the Green River district, turned to the Southwest for new profits and eventually fell into Armijo's hands.

Sublette and Jedediah Smith, partners in the above company, sold out in 1830 and engaged in the Santa Fe trade. While en route toward Santa Fe, Smith left the main party to search for water. Finding the almost dry bed of a stream, he dismounted and scooped out a hole in the sand with his hands. As he lay flat on his stomach in order to drink the water which filtered into the little depression, he heard the sinister "zip!" of an arrow as it struck close by his side. Before he could rise, a dozen more Comanche bows twanged, and he was riddled with arrows.

Struggling to his feet, Smith bravely drew his pistols and as the yelling reds raced forward for his scalp, he drew careful aim and got two of the Indians before he was killed.

Greatly grieved at the loss of his old partner, Sublette and the rest of the party on their journey to the Southwest country where Sublette again engaged in his well-learned trade of trapping.

While bringing out a rich load of furs on one occasion he was halted by agents of Armijo. These men, backed by a military force, seized his furs.

Sublette followed on to Santa Fe and later saw his furs among others set out in the military square at the capitol. He calmly walked over, rifle in hand, and before the eyes of the whole garrison, deliberately picked out his own furs and carried them into a nearby house.

The furious Armijo gave prompt orders for his soldiers to find Sublette and recapture the furs. But, somehow, the soldiers, whose caution outweighed their daring, just couldn't seem to locate the trader. Sublette retained his furs and was not further molested, and so gained the distinction of being the only American trapped who dared defy Armijo, and got away with it.

NEXT WEEK: THE CATTLE INDUSTRY IN THE SOUTHWEST

GRINGO CACHE

BY S. OMAR BARKER

Mariano didn't like the men but he liked to outwit his old enemy, the sheriff.

Mariano Luján was languidly pitching fragrant timothy hay onto a rickety wagon when he heard the roar of a motor coming fast up the rough, steep road to his little log cabin.

"Who's gonna be this?" he inquired of the drowsy burro team hitched to the hay wagon. Like a good many whimsical-minded men whose animals are their chief daily companions, this slim vaquero habitually talked aloud to his livestock. "Maybe she's the big sheriff come for take El Señor Coyote to the jail again, eh?"

The droop-eared burros went on drowsing, heedless both of their master's question and of the low gear hum of the car. A gleam, half of wariness, half of pleasure came into Mariano's black eyes as he

swung the pitchfork to his shoulder and strolled up toward the cabin to welcome his unexpected guests. If it should turn out to be his favorite enemy, the paunchy, black-mustached, blustering sheriff, so much the better. Of all the spices in El Señor Coyote's well spiced life he considered matching wits with Don Eufracio Gallegos the spiciest.

True that at the moment Mariano's freedom of action was somewhat hampered by the fact that he was out on bond, due for trial at the next term of court, charged with stealing—of all things—a sheep.

Returning at dawn one morning from one of his prowling night rides he had found a freshly dressed lamb carcass hanging on his back porch. Supposing it was the gift of a neighbor, he had proceeded to cut chops for breakfast, only to be interrupted by the well-timed arrival of Sheriff Gallegos and four deputies who promptly found the lamb's pelt stuffed under the back steps, discovered on it the ear crop of one of the sheriff's cousins, and arrested Mariano for larceny of one sheep.

In vain the black-eyed vaquero protested that he had not stolen it, and even if he had, it was just a little one.

"What's more from this," he had argued, "when El Señor Coyote steal something himself, he's gonna be more hard for catch!"

But the grand jury had indicted him just the same.

IF El Señor Coyote had known automobiles as he knew the woods and animals, his ears would have told him at once that this smooth, low-gear hum did not come from the piston-slapping motor of the sheriff's bright red jellopy. The long, black coupé had already rolled up before his cabin when he came around the corner.

Though bristly and unshaven, the faces of the three strange men who got out of it wore a pasty, indoors look as uncommon here in the New Mexico mountains as their travel-rumpled but expensive-looking city clothes.

"Hallo, my fran's!' Mariano's white-toothed smile greeted them.

"Your name Loohan?" The short-necked man with a small, sunken mouth in a plump, roundish face ignored the greeting.

"Maybe some leetle birds tell you, eh?"

"Yeah—some Mex birds back down the road. We was inquirin' where could we pick up a guide, some guy wit' horses and stuff to take a party of three on a little trip back in the woods. Y'know, fishin' or huntin' for a coupla weeks. Whaddya say?"

Mariano batted his black eyes thoughtfully at a couple of small, jagged holes in a rear fender of the black coupe.

"Bullets on the tail, eh?" He grinned faintly. "Why you think I don't gonna make report of this to the big sheriff?"

The three exchanged glances. The skinny little man with ferret eyes shrugged. The dark, heavy one with the broken nose fisted his right hand significantly in the side pocket of his coat.

"Let's git on wit' it, Fish-mouth," he said in a guttural voice that was slightly wheezy. "We ain't got all day."

Fish-mouth pulled a roll of bills from his pocket and stood tossing it carelessly from one hand to the other. He raised his brows and winked.

"We heard you ain't exactly sweethearts with the sheriff yourself, Loohan."

"Some leetle birds tell you this, too, eh?"

"Sure," said Fish-mouth. "Now, about this little campin' trip." He paused to gesture toward the green darkness of timbered mountains nearby. "Supposin' you wanted some place to take it easy for a coupla weeks where nobody ain't goin' to come bustin' in on you. Think you could find us a spot like that somewheres up in them woods?"

"As far as that concerns," said Mariano, "it is places for hide in these mountains which make more hard to find it than one needle in two haystacks. But s'pozzin'—"

"Supposin' hell!" broke in Flat-mouth impatiently. "We got the cash to pay you, see! Let's git goin'!"

FOR a moment Mariano squatted on his boot heels, considering. That bulge in Fish-mouth's pocket, he knew, was a gun, and obviously the nervous little skinny man didn't have his right hand reached under the breast of his coat just to scratch himself. Mariano, at the moment, was wearing a pistol inside his left boot top, but he always felt disinclined to use it unless he was forced to. It was not that he was scared, but just as the mountain coyote likes to rely more on his wits than his fangs to keep out of trouble, so did El Señor Coyote prefer cunning to gun smoke.

It was in his mind that if he should refuse to guide these gringos they just might be able forcibly to "borrow" his horses anyway and take to the woods on their own. Of course they would get lost within the first hour, but what worried Mariano most was the abuse his horses would be bound to undergo at their greenhorn hands.

Then, too, there was pompous Don Eufracio Gallegos, high sheriff of Tejón County, to consider. If these gringos were wanted men, doubtless the telegraph would soon put Don Eufracio on their trail. It was some time since he had enjoyed matching wits with Don Eufracio. The temptation to do so now was more than he could resist. With a white-toothed grin he shrugged his shoulders.

"*Bueno*, my fran's!" he said genially. "I'm gonna took the job. Just so quick as I'm bring this load of hay, we gonna vamoose!"

"Attaboy," said Fish-mouth. "Only never mind the hay. Let's git goin'!"

But Mariano was in no such hurry. Disregarding their protests he went back down to the meadow, threw on a few more shocks and came plodding back up with the loaded wagon. It was when he unloaded it that the three men began to appreciate the kind of a guide they had hired.

"The greaser ain't so dumb, eh, Snozzle?" observed Fish-mouth a few minutes later as he surveyed the trim-looking stock of fresh timothy hay.

Diamond-hitching a pack on a flop-eared burro a few yards away, Mariano overheard him. He looked up, a peculiar glitter in his black eyes, started to say something, then changed his mind and went on packing. It was a good many years since anybody had called him a "greaser."

It was plain that none of the three had ever been on a horse. Western ponies sense such things and take advantage of greeenhorn handling to act lazy. When the bay he rode began to lag, Slip, the skinny little man, broke a dead branch from a tree beside the trail and whammed him over the head with it. A hard glitter was in Mairano's eyes as he dropped back to quiet the rearing

pony, but he kept his voice quiet. He broke an aspen switch and handed it to Slip.

"Hit heem by the tail when he go lazy," he advised. "Hitting a horse on the head, she's bad business!"

For about four miles they followed a plain trail up a long, timbered hogback that climbed steeply toward the craggy bulk of a huge mountain mass that was the Sierra Grande. Presently on a bench of solid granite, Mariano halted. He pointed with his chin toward a narrow gash leading into a big, crag-bound cove.

"If a man go in there," he remarked, "he don't got no other get-out except just come back the same way. How you like for make camp in there? Then if the sheriff make follow on the tracks?"—he grinned and made the gesture of drawing a noose tight around his neck—"just same like a trap, eh! How you like?"

"To hell wit' it!" snorted the Snozzle. "Try any tricks like that on us, you damn dumb greaser, an' you'll—"

Despite the hard glitter in his eye, El Señor Coyote laughed.

"The trick I'm gonna make, she's the same horse from another color! Just wait here few minutes, señors, and you gonna see how the mountain wolf scratch dirt on his tracks!"

At first Snozzle and Slip kicked at letting the guide out of their sight, but when Fish-mouth understood what Mariano was up to, he overruled them.

Three times Mariano rode his tall roan through the dozen yards of the narrow passage, and each time carefully backed him out, all the way to the granite bench where they had paused. It took him nearly half an hour to do the same with one of the pack burros, for the burro would back only a step at a time, but finally he got the job done. When he had finished, he paused to wipe sweat from his leather-hued brow, chuckling with shrewd satisfaction as he viewed the line of tracks leading to the mouth of the gash and through it, all apparently headed into the cove called Rincón del Oso.

"If I see these track myself," he explained, "I'm gonna think somebody monkey the business, but another peoples don't got the eyes like El Señor Coyote."

"Cagy, ain't you, Mex?" said Fish-mouth approvingly.

"Who, me myself?" Mariano shrugged and put on a look of pretended deprecation. "For myself, I am just one—what you call it—one damn dumb greaser!"

WHEN the little group angled off the rocky ridge in another direction half an hour later, it was with gunny-sack mufflers on the hoofs of both horses and burros, so that the tracks they left on the mossy, needle-matted ground under thick spruce timber were very faint indeed.

Thereafter El Señor Coyote followed no trails, zigzagging through the depths of dark timber, across steep ridges, up one narrow canyon, down another, until even Fish-mouth, who seemed to trust him more than the others, began to get nervous.

"Look, Mex, we ain't gonna hide out in these damn woods the rest of our lives, y'know! You git us lost up here an' there'll be hell to pay!"

"Lost? Oh, no, *chivo!* The same way I'm take you in, when come the right time, I'm gonna take you out!"

"Yeah," growled Snozzle, rubbing one of his tree-bumped knees, "that sounds O. K., greaser, but how the hell do we know you ain't already lost, yourself?"

"S'pozzin' you look to that tree, *chivo.*" Mariano pointed to an aspen. "The one she's white on trunk. S'pozzin' I'm tell you one time I'm shoot a deer an' hang him to this tree for take out the guts. S'pozzin' while waitin' for blood to run out, I'm cuttin' my brand on the tree—she's picture of wolf. S'pozzin' you take look, now, eh?"

Sure enough, on the other side of the aspen was the brand he had described.

"Well, I'll be damned!" exclaimed Slip. "Ten million trees an' he knows 'em all!"

Thereafter, for hours of zigzag travel through woods and mountains where to all appearances no human foot had ever trod, the three men followed the lead of El Señor Coyote without further distrust. And when he camped them, at dusk, under the broad branches of a big blue spruce at the edge of a small, grassy park with a crystal-watered spring close by, the three gringos seemed to forget their saddle weariness and the soreness of tree-bumped knees in almost boisterous satisfaction with their hide-out.

It was not until Mariano had cooked supper and they were getting ready to bed down on the meager soogans packed in on the burros that suspicion flared again.

"Well, *chivos,*" Mariano sucked deep on his brown paper smoke, "I'm think I go now. When you want me for come back to guide you out?"

"Mex," Fish-mouth said flatly, "you ain't goin' no place—not till we do!"

"But who gonna feed my cows? Who gonna—"

"Let 'em starve. You can buy more when you get through with this job."

"But why?"

"We don't want you bringin' back no visitors. We like it private, see?"

"But, *chivo!*" protested El Señor Coyote. "S'pozzin' I give the word from honor I don't bring nobodies but just myself?"

"This beats a word of honor, Mex!" Snozzle patted his gun. "If Fish-mouth says you stay, you stay."

Mariano shrugged. "More better you tie me, eh?"

"Now you're talkin'," said Slip.

They went to sleep with the guide's hands lashed together with a rope, the other end of which Fish-mouth wore tied to his own wrist, some ten feet away.

It was a long-drawn coyote howl somewhere nearby that startled them awake half an hour before dawn. The rope was still secure to Fish-mouth's wrist, but the remaining six feet of it reached only to a charred end, still smoldering in the campfire's ashes. From the timber came another howl, then the voice of Mariano Luján:

"*Adios, chivos!* I go now to make one monkey from the big sheriff! Don't make too big the fire so somebody gonna see the smoke. Pretty quick—maybe one, two, t'ree day—I come back, eh!"

To men accustomed to city lights, the forest blackness was like a solid wall. Lost in it, there was nothing they could do to stop him. With the coming of daylight Snozzle was all for pulling out at once to try and find their own way out of the woods, but Fish-mouth and Slip out-voted him.

"We wouldn't git to first base," said Fish-mouth. "An' supposin' we did, ain't the highways just as hot today as they was yesterday? Besides I got a hunch that damn greaser'll be back, alone, like he says. Me, I'm gonna relax."

FORTY-ODD minutes after he left them, El Señor Coyote arrived at his cabin, to find Sheriff Gallegos and two deputies prowling the premises. The paunchy sheriff had just raked some hay from a small, freshly made stack and tossed it to his saddle ponies.

"Hah, *chivo!*" he greeted, leaning on the pitchfork and twirling his black mustache. "Where you was all night?"

"Hah, *chivo,* you'self, *panzón,*" Mariano mocked him. "You think El Coyote gonna steal sheeps on the daytime?"

"Hah! More worse than steal sheeps this time!" Don Eufracio unfolded a "wanted" poster and shoved it under the vaquero's eyes.

Mariano looked at the pictured faces of three men wanted in both Kansas and Missouri for armed bank robbery, car theft and murder as if there were nothing at all familiar about them. Even the words "$500 Reward" brought no visible sign of interest. He batted his eyes at the sheriff with a blank, puzzled expression.

"For why you show me this, *panzón?*"

"Hah!" snorted Don Eufracio. "Yesterday some people see these fallers comin' this way in automobile!"

"Sure," Mariano shrugged. "Yesterday also I see one ol' stud buzzard flyin' toward that tree, but that don't show where he's gonna roost."

"Hah! But the buzzard don't fly in automobile!"

"You make too fonny, *panzón,*" Mariano spread his hands. "If you think this automobile stop here, for why you don't make the search?"

Don Eufracio's bristly black brows scowled.

"This we do already," he admitted reluctantly, "but don't found something." Obviously it had him baffled. He wore the look of a poker player who has drawn to a straight flush only to find he has mistaken a diamond for a heart. If the bandit car had come here—well, even he was forced to admit that an automobile couldn't just vanish in thin air.

"*Bueno!*" he growled finally, shaking his fist under Mariano's long, thin nose. "Maybe this time no catch, Luján, but don't forgetting the judge gonna put you in jail next month for stealing one sheep just the same!"

He motioned with a pudgy arm to inform the two deputies leaning lazily against a nearby pine that he was ready to go. "*Vamos, compadres!*"

Then, as if giving vent to the violence of his feelings, Don Eufracio seized the pitchfork he had been leaning against and pitched it at the nearby haystack. It was a good toss, and the fork should have stuck neatly into the hay and held. Instead it struck with a clang and bounced back, its tines quivering.

"Hah!" said the sheriff. He waddled quickly to the haystack. The hand that he burrowed hastily through the loose hay touched metal, and exploring farther, glass. In another jiffy, at his orders, the deputies had half uncovered a long, black coupé.

"Hah!" Don Eufracio bugled triumphantly. He faced Mariano with his gun drawn. "You think I'm don't find the automobile, eh? Now better you tell me where you hide the mens!"

Mariano managed to look suitably sheepish.

"When thees fallers rent from me the horses," he explained nervously, "how I'm gonna know she was robbers of the bank? Now, if I'm put

you on the track, maybe you gonna give me free from stealin' the leetle sheep, eh?"

"Hah!" grunted the sheriff. "I give you free a kick on the pants! Toribio! Juan!" He shouted orders to his deputies. "Go look for the tracks! Which trail they go?"

Within five minutes the deputies were back. The tracks, they reported, of three, maybe four horses, and some burros, were plain to see on the Sierra Grande trail.

An hour later, with three more deputies gathered from Don Eufracio's various relatives at the nearby village of Santo Niño, the man hunters set out, leaving Mariano a prisoner, under guard of the bullet-headed deputy named Toribio.

FOR the second time in twenty-four hours El Señor Coyote's hands were rope bound. This time so were his feet, the lashings securely fastened to one of his own rawhide-bottomed chairs. For the first ten minutes Toribio sat stiffly in another chair, watching him. But he had been in the saddle half the night, coming horseback all the way from Tejón City because Don Eufracio's automobile had no lights, and plainly he was tired.

Presently Mariano chin-pointed toward his bunk.

"The bed more soft than the chair, *compadre,*" he suggested.

"Shut up, *chivo!*" said Toribio.

After another five minutes silence Mariano tried again:

"Maybe you like for play some cards, eh, *compadre?*"

Deputy Toribio Gonzals was no mental giant, but it required little brains to realize that in order to play cards the prisoner would have to have his hands free.

"Shut up!" he said, and got himself a drink of water.

"Maybe you gonna find some whiskey in those shelf," offered Mariano helpfully.

"Shut up!" said Toribio. But after a while he got up and looked. There was a bottle, but except for a mere dribble it was empty.

This time he chose the bunk, half reclining on it. Presently his eyelids began to sag.

"Hup!" exclaimed Mariano. "What the High Sheriff gonna think if you go to sleep on the job, *compadre?*"

"Shut up!" growled Toribio.

"The other bottle whiskey," said Mariano, "she's down in the cellar! Nothing more better than leetle drink for keeping awake, *compadre!*"

"Shut up!" Toribio grunted. But presently he jerked himself awake again and stood up.

"Where the door to this cellar, *chivo?*" he demanded.

Mariano chin-pointed.

"Onder the woodbox, *compadre.* One lettle ring, just pull 'im up!"

Toribio propped the trapdoor up with a stick of wood and groped his way down ladderlike steps into the cellar. Quietly Mariano began to rock his chair, moving it slowly. It was just as he heard the sound of a pulled cork down in the cellar that he managed, finally, to budge a chair leg against the trapdoor's prop. It fell shut with a bang. Mariano grinned his satisfaction, as he heard the trick catch click shut. It would take a *bobo* like Toribio some time to figure how to unfasten it from below.

Up through the floor came muffled sounds of cursing.

"Shut up!" Mariano's answer taunted.

As quickly as he could, Mariano jockeyed himself and the chair he was bound to, over to a low window where he managed to butt out a

pane with his head. Then, with all the strength of his lungs he began to howl, high and shrill like a coyote.

Across the fields one Tomás Padilla stopped pitching hay to listen. Plenty of times in the past when his winter cupboard had been bare, Mariano Luján had come riding over with a quarter of beef on his saddle bow. Now, judging from the howling, El Coyote was in trouble. Abruptly, Tomás dropped his pitchfork and ran. Five minutes later he came bursting into Mariano's cabin, found a butcher knife and cut the ropes.

"*Caramba,* Mari! What the meaning of this? What—"

"Don't took time for talk!" exclaimed Mariano. "Go quick to the *placita,* make telephone to Señor Huber in Tejón City—you know heem, my ol' friend that was sheriff before this *políticos* Gallegos. Tell him to bring some mens, come quick an' take this black automobile to the place where used to be the sawmill of Don Henrique. Tell him Mariano says don't come on the road where it crosses the sawdust, but just hide in the bushes by the river and putty soon gonna catch some bandits for which is offer the big reward. Tell him once more El Coyote gonna make monkey from the Big Sheriff! You savvy this? *Pronto!*"

Even as the flying shirt tail of Tomás Padilla disappeared down the road toward Santo Niño, Mariano ran to the corral for a horse. He did not pause even to saddle. Don Eufracio and his posse had been gone little more than an hour. If he hurried fast enough—

With a sharp ax on his shoulder, heels dug into his pony's bare ribs, Mariano Luján sped up the Sierra Grande trail. From the cabin came an angry shout. Bullets whanged the air. Toribio was out of the cellar, but there was no danger of him following very soon. With crafty forethought Mariano had turned the deputy's horse loose in the pasture with a bunch of his own wild broncs.

EVEN Don Eufracio, inexpert woodsman though he was, had not found the trail hard to follow. When it led him through the narrow passage into the crag-rimmed cove called Rincón del Oso, he began to move cautiously, sure that his quarry was near.

"Look the tracks!" he gloated. "They go in here—but don't come out! This Mariano think he too

QUESTION

Which are the only cough drops containing Vitamin A? (CAROTENE)

ANSWER

damn smart, eh? But no! What he do, he put them in one very fine trap!"

Knowing the one spring up near the base of the upper crags was the only camp water in the cove, the posse ceased to bother with tracks.

"That's where they gonna camp," Don Eufracio said confidently. "We gonna snook on it an' make surprise, just like cat on rabbit!"

They "snook," they took their time, and they "made surprise" all right. But the surprise was that there was nobody there.

"*Caramba,* listen!" suddenly exclaimed one of the deputies.

From the direction of the cove's entrance came the rhythmic ringing of a swift-swung ax. All the way, hurrying back to their horses, they could hear it. Swiftly they remounted and spurred down the trail. As they came into the upper end of the narrow entrance the lead rider suddenly yelled and reined up. A few yards ahead of him a big pine crashed down across the narrow gap. Hardly had the crash of its falling subsided when there rose on the air the shrill howl of a coyote, followed by the thud of horses' hoofs hurrying away.

If curses had been axes, Don Eufracio would have disposed of the pine-trunk barrier swiftly enough. As it was no horse could get by, and since he was not built for walking, there was nothing the High Sheriff could do but wait while he sent two men down the four miles to the Santo Niño Valley afoot after a saw and ax.

MARIANO LUJÁN boot-heeled his saddleless horse into the camp so suddenly that Fish-mouth was the only one who managed to get out his gun before he leaped down among them.

"What's up, greaser!" demanded Snozzle. "What's the big idea scarin' hell out of us?"

"What's up?" Fish-mouth snapped it out. He could see that their guide was excited.

"The Big Sheriff!" he exclaimed. "He's find the car! He's try for follow the trail, but just now he's all shut up in Rincón del Oso. This give us plenty time for find more better hide-out before he's put nose to the trail again!"

In a city, in a high-powered car on the highways, these three were the kind of men who knew their stuff. But the strangeness of the mountain forest had already begun to make them uneasy. They held hurried council, then:

"T'hell wit' another hide-out, Mex!" said Fish-mouth. "Can you git us back to the car before this sheriff gits back out o' the woods?"

"Hah!" said Mariano. "More quicker than you think!"

Mariano saddled up hastily, leaving the camp outfit where it was, the pack burros loose. Although he had led these greenhorns all over hell's horse pasture to get there, actually the hide-out he had brought them to was hardly two miles from his own cabin. Now for reasons of his own, he took still another roundabout way bringing them out, delaying purposely till he heard the hum of a motor coming in close to the hills.

"Listen!" he grinned. "That's my fran' bringing your car to a more better place so you don't take no chance in case the Big Sheriff already came back to my cabin!"

"Hell, it sounds like the coupé all right!" exclaimed Slip.

Fish-mouth reined clumsily over close to Mariano.

"If you're double-crossin' us, Mex—" For the rest of the threat

he prodded Mariano's ribs with the nose of his automatic. Thereafter he rode, gun in hand, as close behind their guide as he could. Presently they emerged onto an old logging road, rounded a curve and yonder, just beyond where the road meandered faintly across an ancient, weathered sawmill dump, stood the black coupé.

"Hold it, greaser!" Fish-mouth spoke suspiciously. "Where's the guy that brought the bus up here? If this is a plant—"

The sudden appearance of harmless-looking Tomás Padilla from behind a tree broke in on him.

"Hallo, *primo!*" he addressed Mariano. "The automobile she's here!" He pointed at the coupé, already turned around, ready to head out.

With sudden relief at getting back once more to a more familiar means of travel, the three men kicked their horses into a trot, Mariano still slightly in the lead. Behind him Fish-mouth spoke briefly in a low tone to Snozzle, "When we get to the car, let 'im have it!" Snozzle nodded. His hand fisted on the gun in his coat pocket.

All at once, as they rode onto the ancient sawdust, Mariano's pony grunted and reared. Spurred, but under a tight-jerked rein, his jittering hoofs gouged deep into the ancient mill rubble. Up out of the disturbed sawdust rose an angry buzzing hum. Almost as if by private agreement, all four horses began to kick and buck at once, as angry yellow-jackets settled on leg and rump and nose. Within half a jiffy all four came bucking and kicking out on the danger zone, but only Mariano's still carried its rider.

On the sawdust dump three thrown men scrambled cursing to their feet, their arms windmilling madly, so frantically intent upon fighting off yellow-jackets that they failed to see a little old man and two six-gunned companions spring up from behind nearby willows until it was too late. Ex-sheriff Huber made the capture without a shot.

It was to Mariano that Fish-mouth, Snozzle and Slip addressed bitter curses as the man who introduced himself as the district attorney helped snap on the handcuffs.

"Let 'em blow off steam," said the district attorney. "A man can stand a little name calling for a five-hundred-dollar reward, eh, Luján?"

"El Coyote don't took no rewords!" Mariano shrugged, nursing a bee-stung ear. "The reason I'm hide these *chivos* on the mountain, that's to make some fun for the Big Sheriff. The reason I'm bring them back on the bee's nest to catch without shoot nobody, that's because, even if El Coyote sometimes steal the sheep, he don't like that they call him greaser!"

"Reward or not," said the district attorney soberly, "in bringing about the capture of these much-wanted criminals, you've done the law an important service. More important than any indictment against one Mariano Luján for larceny of one sheep. I shall see that the charge is dismissed."

Mariano gave a white-toothed grin of appreciation. "I'm afraid this gonna make the Big Sheriff putty mad!"

"Unfortunately, yes." The district attorney smiled faintly. "And just as a matter of personal advice, you'd have a lot less trouble of that sort, Luján, if you'd just kind of lay off the sheriff."

"Sure," smiled El Señor Coyote, "not so much trouble, but not so much fun, too!"

THE END

TREACHERY ON TALKING RIVER

BY KENNETH GILBERT

Old Jed Bennett, owner of the Pilchuck Logging Co., stared angrily at his boom foreman, Big Jules Beauvais. The latter, a giant of a man, stood in the middle of the floor, feet planted well apart, as though he had difficulty maintaining his balance. His eyes were bloodshot, his black-stubbled jaws and matted hair gave him an unkempt, savage appearance.

"Drunk!" roared Bennett suddenly. "The mill had to shut down for half an hour because you were

guzzling whiskey in Red Teagle's saloon instead of making your gang hustle logs!"

Beauvais grinned, not at all impressed by this outburst of temper. "So w'at?" he demanded. "Maybe she's good t'ing, to shut down dat mill for a spell, hey? Drunk? Sure! Everybody in camp get drunk today and tonight, because tomorrow is wan beeg day, w'en folks come from long way round to see rolleo!"

"If it happens again I'll fire you!" threatened Bennett.

But the other's grin did not relax; if anything it became derisive. "But no!" he declared soothingly. "You fire Big Jules Beauvais, and w'at happen? You lose championship of Talking River! Your men have nobody to bet on!" He thumped his massive chest. "Big Jules is bes' damn log birler in world!" he boasted. "Always he win rolleos. Ever since he came to Talking River he has been champion. Your bes' men always follow champion; w'en Big Jules go, all your bes' men go with heem. Maybe we go 'cross lake to Bill Dennison's mill. How you lak *dat,* M'sieu' Bennett?"

The mill owner bit his lip to control his rage. Beauvais spoke the truth. Drunk and unstable though he might be, he was still the champion log roller of the Talking River, and his presence at Bennett's camp gave the place prestige among men. They were like children in the pride they took in belonging to a championship outfit.

Bill Dennison, whose mill was just across this lake which was formed by a wide and slack stretch of the turbulent Talking River, would welcome Big Jules Beauvais and the latter's crew. Right now, with his mill operating every hour of the day and night to fill contracts that would make or break him, Jed Bennett couldn't afford to take a chance. And the cunning Beauvais knew it. But the mill owner, licked though he knew himself to be, couldn't resist one thrust.

"You win, Beauvais," he said quietly. "You've been champion of Talking River ever since Whitewater Breen was drowned. *There* was a birler who could beat you with both eyes shut! I never did understand what happened—but there was talk, Beauvais, and I haven't forgotten it!"

THE big man stiffened. Of a sudden the alcoholic fumes seemed to vanish from his brain. His swarthy face turned livid with anger and his teeth showed like a wild animal's bared fangs. "So!" he declared softly. "You remembaire, huh? You remembaire he was boom foreman here, and I beat him fair and square—and I got his job!"

"You got his job," Bennett reminded him sharply, "because I needed a boom foreman just then and Breen was dead! Something queer about *that,* too! But, never mind!" he added hastily, fearing that maybe he had said too much. At the moment he was sure he would have given a year of his life to be able to set this braggart in his rightful place. But Jed Bennett couldn't indulge himself in the luxury of firing this man.

Jules Beauvais gave his employer one triumphant look, then went swaggering out of the door and down the street, and Jed Bennett, gaze following him moodily, straightened suddenly.

Yet he was not looking at Beauvais. He was looking beyond the foreman and up the river, where the stream broke through Devil's Gate

before losing its fury in the quieter waters of the lake. There was a log coming through the rocky defile, and atop this log was a man.

Somewhat astonished, Jed Bennett got up and went to the window. Never but once, in his recollection, had a man ridden a log through the Gate and lived to tell of it. That was a long while ago, eight years at least, and the man had been Whitewater Breen, now dead. Sometimes birlers driving logs above the canyon were trapped there in its terrible waters, but when that happened their bodies were fished out of the pond below. Bennett gave a startled cry, convinced that he was looking upon another tragedy.

Yet the rider did not fall. The log, a rough-barked fir, reared and bucked like an outlaw horse as the boiling waves, their crests frothy, caught it in their treacherous grip. Spray swept over the rider for an instant, but the next he emerged, still atop the stick. And then the log, escaping the clutch of the breakers, charged in swift triumph into the calmer water below. It happened so rapidly that Jed Bennett blinked in astonished admiration. A few moments later the log was swirled so close to the sticks rafted behind the booms that the rider took a running leap toward them, landed expertly, then came zigzagging ashore.

Jed Bennett sighed, reminded with sharp abruptness that he was old. This was a young man, he saw, well set up and muscular, a "cat on the logs," for only a topnotch birler who had youth and skill could have ridden that stick through the Devil's Gate. Jed Bennett felt a pang of envy as he remembered the lost days of his own youth. Probably this newcomer was just another of the many birlers drifting into camp for the big log-riding contest which would be held the following day to determine the next champion whitewater man of Talking River. Already the camp was crowded with such men, and Red Teagle's bar was jammed to the doors.

Suddenly Jed Bennett knew that he would have traded places with any of them, just to be young, strong and devil-may-care again—and free of such worries as running a big logging operation while he had to swallow his pride in the face of Jules Beauvais' bold insults. He was still engrossed in such thoughts when he heard a step outside, and the door

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open. He looked up to see the strange birler.

AT close range the man appeared younger than he had at a distance, but likewise bigger. Fully as big, Bennett decided, as Jules Beauvais. "Well?" asked the mill owner brusquely, for recollection of the bullying boom foreman soured his temper.

"They told me," declared the birler, "that I'd find Jed Bennett here. I'm askin' for a job!"

Bennett leaned back, eying the other. "I leave hirin' to my boom foreman. He picks his own crew. You might try Dennison, across the lake," he added in a kindlier tone. Yet as he spoke there was sudden hope which flared in his mind for an instant, then died. If this boy were not so young and unseasoned, he might be the answer to Jed Bennett's prayer for a man to replace Jules Beauvais. Yet common sense told him that such hope was impossible.

The birler looked down at his hands and feet, then up to Bennett. Resentment crept into his face. "How good does a man have to be to get a job here?" he demanded. "I've come nearly two hundred miles, mostly by ridin' sticks downstream, to reach this place. I'm busted now, and tired of livin' on huckleberries! If I could get a chance—"

"Wait, now!" Jed Bennett would have stoutly denied that he was softhearted, but he did know what it meant to be broke and hungry. "It's like this, son. Beauvais, who runs the boom here, is a terror. Most men would rather stay away from him. He's got a crew that he's licked to his own way of thinkin'. If he saw you ride that stick through Devil's Gate, you've already cooked your goose with him. Beauvais always aims to be top dog here. He doesn't want any competition, see. You understand? I let him run the boom his own way because I want results—"

He broke off as the door opened again. Beauvais stood there, truculence and suspicion in his eyes. "Boss," he said heavily, "me, I see dees river punk head for here. W'at he want, hey?"

Bennett's face reddened. Beauvais was insolent enough when sober. Drunk, he was almost unendurable. But the lumberman restrained his anger. "Wants a job," he replied shortly. "I told him you did all the hirin' and firin' for the boom crew!"

Triumph showed in the foreman's eyes. "But, yes!" He waved a thick hand at the birler. "Out!" he commaded. "Grab your turkey an' travel. Jules Beauvais wants no river punks in hees crew!"

The stranger did not seem impressed; he did not even stir. Old Jed Bennett's breath sucked inward sharply in anticipation of what he knew was coming.

"But no?" roared Beauvais in exasperation. "Here, maybe, is somet'ing you onnerstan'!" He hooked a terrific right at the other's face.

The blow did not reach its mark. The young birler's head jerked back out of the way, just in time. Then, just as Beauvais lost balance, a heavy fist crashed full against the foreman's jaw. Beauvais' head flew up and there was a look of profound surprise on his face as he slumped to the floor.

BENNETT leaped from his chair with an involuntary yell of delight while the young birler stared at him in vast astonishment. The mill owner leaned over and rolled back one of Beauvais' eyelids. "Jest knocked out!" he grunted. "He'll

be all right in a minute. Son, you pack a wallop! But," and he swung sternly on the other, "you've ruined any chance you might've had of gettin' a job under Beauvais! If you're smart you'll fan out of here before he wakes up. Run along to the cook shack and tell 'em I said to give you a feed—a big one! Then you make tracks ten feet apart gettin' out of this camp!"

The other shrugged. "Thanks for the feed. I can use *that!* But I'm not hurried about gettin' out of camp!"

Old Jed Bennett eyed him anew. "Comes to me now that you might pick up a grubstake here, because you sure can ride logs. I saw that with my own eyes! The big log-rollin' contest—biggest thing on the river—comes off tomorrow. You might grab off one of the small prizes!"

The birler looked up sharply. He seemed on the point of retort, but closed his lips firmly. After a moment he said quietly enough, "Sure! I heard about it! One of the reasons why I took the trouble to reach this place. But I didn't figure on goin' busted. There's an entry fee of ten dollars, I've discovered. That lets me out!"

A peculiar look came into old Jed Bennett's eyes. "Sho', now!" He glanced at the sprawled Beauvais again. "Son, you don't understand, of course, but you've done me a small favor." He reached into his pocket and came out with a greenback. "Take this and get into that rolleo!" he said gruffly. "Reckon that's the only way to get shut of you. Send you downriver with your tail feathers draggin'!" Yet he could not hide the hope and plea in his voice.

Astonished, the birler fingered the money. "I'll take this—as a loan, but, I don't understand! Your own man here," and he indicated Beauvais, "is the champ of the river!" Then his face darkened. "Wait, I see it now! You want to give him a crack at *me!*" He flung the bill at Bennett's feet. "There's your money, mister! I've got a watch here that belonged to my dad. Maybe somebody will lend me ten dollars on it!"

From a pocket he drew out an expensive-looking timepiece, snapped open its engraved gold case, then closed it reverently and slid it out of sight. As old Jed Bennett looked at the watch, his mouth sagged. He started to speak, then closed his lips resolutely. The young birler turned and strode out.

Jed Bennett leaned over Jules Beauvais and shook the man roughly. "Wake up!" he commanded.

NOT since ancient Indian tribes, hideously painted masks on their faces, danced there by the river lake, had the land seen stranger sights than the big annual log-rolling contests. Logging camps for miles around were virtually deserted while their crews, clad in rough, bright-colored wool clothing, gathered beside the big log pond of Bennett's mill.

Out in the middle of it, in water that looked smooth but which had a treacherous undertow from the river itself, pairs of men performed crazy gyrations on spinning logs. These men were dressed almost alike—flannel undershirts, "stagged" canvas trousers that ended at the knee, laced boots whose soles were studded with steel calks. Two men to a log, the contestants used the calked shoes to spin the sticks, faster and faster, until they were compelled to run at top speed to avoid being hurled into the water.

Pair after pair tried it and always the result was the same—one of them finally lost balance and went backward with a splash. And when this happened a throaty roar went up from the watching crowd. Bets were paid on the spot. There were hoots of triumph, and then the victor led the rush to the saloon to squander his winnings.

Old Jed Bennett watched the rolleo with kindling eye. Time was when he had done this very thing. He, too, had been a birler of renown before his chance came to tackle bigger things than rolling logs. But he could appreciate skill, and what was happening now stirred his admiration. For the strange young birler who had come into camp from nowhere was vanquishing his rivals one by one. Already he had won some small prizes, probably fifty dollars in all. "Got enough for a grubstake, anyway," Bennett reflected. "But he'll never beat Jules Beauvais!" That test was still to come.

Even the crowd bellowed approval, despite the fact that the stranger had beaten some of their best birlers. They gave him a name, too. Whitewater Kid, they called him, and old Jed Bennett nodded. Surely the boy was a true whitewater rider, but old Jed fancied that he alone knew how apt was the name. "Had to be *that*," Bennett reasoned to himself. "Just couldn't be anything else!" But now the Whitewater Kid had vanquished his last opponent and, in the hush that fell over the crowd, the bull-throated announcer raised his voice.

"This event," he called, "is for the championship of the river. Between the Whitewater Kid and the present champion, Big Jules Beauvais!" Old Jed Bennett stood up a little straighter and took a deep breath.

"He's good, that boy is," the mill owner found himself thinking aloud, "but he's not good enough for Beauvais. Hell, Beauvais knows *all* the tricks, good and bad alike! Beauvais will get square, even if he has to commit murder!" Mere dexterity wouldn't be enough against the glowering boom boss who was not only there to defend his title but also to have revenge. Defeating the Kid wouldn't satisfy him. Jed Bennett suddenly became grave as the aspects of the situation loomed before him in a way he had not thought of before.

Queer things sometimes happened in a contest such as this, things which the spectators didn't understand. For instance, an expert birler like his former boom boss, Breen, had been drowned in a bout with Jules Beauvais. Beauvais had "run him off the log," in birlers' parlance, and Breen had sunk like a stone! When they recovered his body they said he'd been taken with a cramp from plunging into the cold water while overheated from his terrific battle with Beauvais on the log. Maybe, Jed Bennett thought, it had happened that way—and maybe not! Breen was a good swimmer, but he had plumped into the water and stayed under.

Old Jed made a queer sound in his throat as remembrance of that moment came. It had happened once; *it could happen again!* And there on the leering face of the swarthy Beauvais was written plainly the warning that something like it was going to happen—*now!* Involuntarily, Bennett took a step forward as though he might prevent it, but he stopped as he realized that interference would be futile. What could he say, what could he do?

He couldn't make the Kid believe it—nor aybody else, Bennett knew. They'd think he had gone crazy. Everybody knew there was an un-

dertow out there. It was part of the risk a birler had to take in this rolleo. Anyway, he tried to reassure himself, they'd be watchin' to grab the Kid when he came up. If he came up, was the chilling thought that persisted. Yet Bennett knew he was helpless; the boy had gone into this thing defiantly and stubbornly.

BUT drama was already in full swing out there on that log. The Kid was a "cat," no doubt about it. The veteran Beauvais was more seasoned and probably stronger-legged, for suddenly he "took the roll" away from the Kid who had to hustle to avoid losing belance. Even while the boy's legs drove like pistons to keep up, Beauvais leaped suddenly in the air and came down with his weight on the opposite side of the log, stopping it almost instantly. It was an old trick, but if worked properly it usually produced results in hurling the opponent into the water. And it did just that —almost!

The Kid saved himself by agile footwork, and Jed Bennett let go a gusty sigh of relief. And now the boy carried the fight to Beauvais, for, before the boom boss could set himself, the Kid started the log rolling backward. Just in time Beauvais caught the timing, and a mighty chorus went up from the crowd. Faster and faster the log spun, then the Kid leaped straight upward, twisted his body in air and came down with calks set against the motion of the stick.

The jarring impact of arrested motion made Beauvais teeter precariously for an instant, but he was an old hand at this game, and he was not to be caught unawares by any common trick like that. He looked at the Kid with a satisfied grin of triumph on his dark face, and Jed Bennett knew that the moment of crisis was nearing.

In his uneasiness the old man moved closer to the water's edge. He might have had some vague intention in mind. Perhaps he hoped to warn the boy, even though he should have realized that such interference would probably disqualify the Kid if he paid attention. It was all right to shout encouragement, to give advice—but to make an open charge that Jules Beauvais had murder in his heart, was another matter. How could it be done? How could Jed Bennett prove such an assertion? Besides, it meant an open break with Beauvais, and the serious consequences which would follow. But Bennett no longer cared about that; he *must* let the boy know! Yet

at that moment Bennett realized that something queer and inexplicable was taking place out there.

Jules Beauvais had said something to the boy; probably he was taunting him, trying to make him nervous. But the Kid was answering, and what he said produced an odd effect. Jules Beauvais straightened in astonishment—and nearly lost balance! Yet the next instant he attacked his task more savagely than ever.

The Kid had got Beauvais mad, was Bennett's guess. Or maybe scared. Beauvais kept looking at his feet, and suddenly Bennett realized that he was stepping higher than he did before! In his eagerness, Bennett moved closer; he even walked out on one of the booms, risking a wetting if he slipped off. He *had* to know what was going on out there. Of a sudden he knew that this drama of the logs concerned him more vitally than had seemed possible. "The Kid's workin' some shenanigan on him," Bennett mused. "Somethin' Beauvais has never been up against before!" For, of a sudden, it was apparent that Jules Beauvais was in distress; he was faltering.

Probably it was not a matter of endurance. It was true that the Kid, in order to qualify for this bout with the champion, had been compelled to conquer a dozen other rivals, and that in itself was enough to tire him. On the other hand, Beauvais was fresh—save for the whiskey he had drunk and which had now been burned out of him. Yet both men had deep reserves of strength on which to draw. No, it wasn't a matter of endurance; it was some mental angle which was troubling Beauvais.

He was working hard now. His face was lifted and strained. He drove his strong legs faster and faster, trying by speed alone to hurl the Kid off the log. But, although the boy was likewise working at top speed, he kept his face turned toward Beauvais, speaking to him with deadly insistence, but in such a low tone that the words could not be heard by Jed Bennett.

A HUSH had fallen over the crowd. Men stood there in silence, expressions grim and intent, for they realized that they were seeing river history in the making. This Whitewater Kid whom they had encouraged, knowing full well that Jules Beauvais would beat him at last, somehow had got the boom foreman's "goat." Nothing like this had ever happened before. And in that strange hush, the sound of the birlers' drumming feet, the hiss of water as the log spun with tremendous speed, came with startling loudness. Old Jed Bennett, straining his ears, caught fragmentary sentences from the Kid's tightly drawn lips.

"—boots are heavy. Lead in 'em. Half a pound in each! You feel 'em . . . weigh a ton. They'll pull you down to the bottom when you fall." Bennett saw a spasm of fear cross Beauvais' face, saw the muscles along his jaw tighten as he strove for greater effort; his once swarthy face was now the color of old ivory, mottled ivory. Still the Kid's voice dinged at him monotonously, "—heavy boots . . . lead in 'em! Lead in 'em!" And then abruptly the thing happened.

The same old trick—but this time it worked! While Jules Beauvais fought desperately to keep up with the speed of the spinning log, the Kid went high in the air, reversing his position, while the weight of his body, aided by the gripping effect of his calked boots, came down to

slow the log with a sharp jerk. And Jules Beauvais, mind concentrated for the moment only on maintaining his timing on the treadmill, was thrown up and backward as though the log had exploded beneath his feet. He screamed, flailing his arms as he went under.

For a moment, too, the Kid teetered there as the log, relieved of Beauvais' weight, was unbalanced. But as he came upright at last, there was a throaty roar of approval from the crowd. Then the boy did a queer thing. He whipped out a knife, hastily slitted the rawhide laces of his boots, hurled the heavy footwear ashore and took a running dive at the spot where Jules Beauvais had disappeared. The water closed over him, smoothed out again. Then the spell of the crowd snapped and they jumped into action as Jed Bennett bellowed orders.

"Pike poles!" he roared. "Out on that boom, somebody! Fish 'em out or they'll go into the undertow!" Somebody pushed off in a skiff, looking over the side into the dark water, while others probed along the side of the boom with the long poles which were armed with an iron hook at the end. Then there came a shout from below.

"Here they are! The Kid's got him!" Old Jed looked that way, to see the boy floundering ashore, dragging the limp figure of Jules Beauvais behind him. In swift strides Bennett reached the spot, caught the Kid by the shoulders and straightened him up. Already others were pumping Beauvais' arms and legs and he was beginning to moan as consciousness returned. In the bale of voices and confusion Jed Bennett drew the birler aside. There were tears on the old man's cheeks and a catch in his voice.

"You did it!" he declared huskily. "Somehow I knew you'd do it! But I never figured you'd trick him by puttin' sheet lead in the soles of his boots—"

"I didn't!" broke in the other. "But he thought I did. That's the way he drowned my father at this very place! I'd always kept dad's old drivin' boots, and years afterward I discovered there was sheet lead fitted beneath the insoles. There was no way to prove that Beauvais did it except to make him believe that I'd played the same trick on him! That scared him, made him nervous, because he figured if he slipped off he'd sink. His imagination did the rest!"

"But you dived in and saved him!"

"So that I could give him the lickin' he deserves! Soon as he's able to stand, I aim to work him over so he'll remember me! Then I'm hittin' downriver. Now I don't need that job I came two hundred miles to get!"

"Breen," Bennett said suddenly, "it's Jules Beauvais who is goin' downriver, not you! He's finished here. He's no longer champion birler of Talkin' River, and I don't have to stand for his insults any more! I've a better job for you than the one you asked for. You're boss of the boom here, if you'll take it. That's always been my rule—best birler is the boss!"

The Kid couldn't hide his pleasure. But curiosity was uppermost in his voice. "How'd you guess I was the son of Whitewater Breen?" he demanded.

"The watch you showed me," Bennett answered. "Son, I gave it to Whitewater Breen myself the first time he won the championship of the river!"

THE END

BOOMERANG IN POLECAT PASS

BY R. EDGAR MOORE

AURORA was like a town in the path of an oncoming hurricane. An atmosphere of disaster hovered over its streets, but it was tempered by an acceptance of the inevitable. Men, heavily armed, talked quietly in small clusters or went about their business in grim silence. No convivial sounds came from the Aurora Saloon, rather there was a subdued murmur of conversation carried on in tense undertones. Even Jackson's Mercantile was deserted except for an occasional man buying shells. The swearing of a hostler at the livery barn beat harshly against the abnormal quiet.

The temper of the town was frought with danger and potential violence and could be summed up in one word—sheep!

Lee Sullivan was more acute to

the quiet menace of the town than most. It was closing in on him from two sides. He had heard that Hess Rolfe had arrived that morning and he knew that United States Deputy Marshal Ed Bruce was already there, though he hadn't seen him—yet.

Lee leaned against the hitch rack in front of the Aurora Saloon and rolled a cigarette. He was lifting a match to its twisted end when above the flame he saw Marshal Bruce leave the jail and head toward him. Lee's eyes riveted on the tall, gaunt figure of the famous lawman and when the match seared his fingers, he was barely conscious of letting it drop. For a moment he thought of getting his horse and riding out of town, but he wearily shrugged the thought out of his mind. It had to come sometime, and if Bruce recognized him, running would do no good. The chance that the marshal wouldn't recognize him was small, for it was said that he had never forgotten a face in his turbulent life. Lee crumpled the unlit cigarette between his fingers and waited, while the measured footsteps of the lawman drummed on the boardwalk with the finality of coming doom.

It had been five years since the Blue Mesa war; five years since Lee had crawled from beneath his dead horse, shot all to hell and with a price on his head, to escape from a country swarming with hostile syndicate gunmen. He had come then to the Aurora River range and started his modest spread on the Uplands above Aurora. There he had found friendliness, and he had found Frank Webb.

Lee had filled the place in the old cattleman's heart of the son he had never had, and Frank Webb's kindly affection had supplied the need of a father Lee couldn't remember. That comradeship and the neighborliness of the other ranchers had brought peace and wiped out the bitterness of the past. Then, in one swift leap, the past had overtaken Lee, and his friends were threatened with disaster.

Under cover of rolling another cigarette, Lee carefully watched Ed Bruce bear down upon him. The marshal's searching glance raked the young rancher, lingered momentarily on the low-slung guns, but when Lee looked up, Bruce's eyes were inscrutable. He paused briefly, then nodded and passed on. Lee lighted his cigarette and relief lifted his shoulders. It was Bruce's way to play his cards close to his belt and never make a move until he was ready, but Lee believed he had escaped recognition.

Someone in front of the hotel called the lawman's name and through narrowed eyes, Lee regarded the figure that angled across the street. Five years hadn't changed the arrogant bearing of Hess Rolfe. The man walked as though the world were his to turn into a bloody shambles whenever his greedy nature desired—and it seemed as though he were right.

FRANK WEBB, accompanied by Earl Stanley, came out of the saloon to stand beside Lee. They were the two biggest ranchers on the Uplands and their lips were set in grim lines. Their eyes snapped dangerously as they gazed up the street.

"What we heard is true," Lee said quietly. "Rolfe has brought in a marshal."

"It don't change things a bit," Webb snorted.

"I'm not sure," Lee answered. "We'd better go talk to 'em."

They started up the walk and Lee felt that he was walking straight into the open door of prison. He and

Marshal Bruce had met only once, but he had faced Hess Rolfe through gun smoke a dozen times. The sheepman could hardly fail to recognize him and would lose no time in exposing him to Bruce. Yet, Lee had no alternative but to stick by his friends.

The town looked on in grim silence while the little group that controlled the fate of the surrounding range met in the middle of the street. Lee faced Rolfe squarely, but the sheepman gave no indication of recognizing him. His eyes were mean and full of hate, but the hate was directed at all those who opposed him, rather than at anyone in particular.

"Well, gentlemen," Marshal Bruce said mildly, "you've been pointed out to me as the interested parties on the Uplands. Let's get this business settled."

"It's settled!" Webb answered shortly.

"Like hell it is!" Rolfe growled. "Aurora Canyon is the only way to the Uplands. You've got it forted up with yore men. Call 'em off!"

"The only way you'll ever get to the Uplands," Webb said grimly, "is to kill every rancher and puncher up there first."

"I've got guns enough to do just that!" Rolfe answered venomously.

"Take it easy," said Bruce. "I ain't got a thing to say for a man that tries to force his will with hired guns but"—he turned to the ranchers—"Rolfe has got the law on his side. He bought five sections of land in the Uplands legally enough. Aurora Canyon is public domain and Rolfe's got the right to use it."

"Not to run sheep through," Webb said angrily.

"The law can't allow a man to be kept off his land—even if he's takin' in sheep," Bruce said quietly. "You'll have to get yore men out of the canyon, Webb."

"I won't do it!" the old cattleman shouted. "The only way them stinkin' sheep will get through, will be behind guns!"

"Suits me!" Rolfe rasped.

"I think we can keep Rolfe out," Lee said softly. "If we can—what then, marshal?"

"Why," Bruce said, "when the first shot is fired I'm comin' in and arrest every man there."

"You mean—"

"I mean every man will get from ten to twenty years behind bars!"

"If you come in there, marshal," Webb broke out, "you'll come at the risk of yore life!"

Bruce shrugged. "What does that matter? If you kill me, there'll be another marshal along. You can't whip the United States government, Webb."

And all at once Lee knew that they couldn't. He had been prepared to pay the price of bitterness and suffering caused by a range war. They might overcome that. But the law was too big to whip. Lee looked at the seamed face of Frank Webb and knew that the old cattleman was not going to give in. The ranchers were going to risk death and destruction in a fight that they *couldn't* win!

The seeming injustice of it roiled Lee, but in that moment he knew that it was better to let sheep in than have women and children see their husbands and fathers dead or in jail. The idea of Frank Webb rotting in a cell for the rest of his life turned Lee cold inside. He couldn't let it happen and yet he didn't see how he could prevent it. Then Lee's personal problem came home to him. He looked up to find Bruce's enigmatic eyes upon him.

"You look like you can use them guns," the marshal said casually.

"If I have to," Lee admitted. "I'd rather not, but I don't see any other way."

"You can't win," Bruce said flatly. "You'd better think it over, men. Rolfe's sheep are going through."

"At three o'clock they start moving," Rolfe said. "They're being held a mile from town. You've got three hours to clear the canyon. Then me and my men are coming through!"

"Come shootin'!" Webb snapped.

Rolfe snorted and turned away. Bruce looked speculatively at Lee and seemed on the point of saying something. Lee waited, outwardly calm, but gripped by a dire premonition of trouble. If the marshal had recognized him, now was the time for it to come out. But when he spoke, Bruce addressed them all. "Don't do anything you'll regret, men," he said and walked on.

THAT'S that," Webb grunted. "You'd better get on out to the canyon, Lee. We're countin' on you to lead our men in this fight. Me and Earl ain't as young as we used to be."

"We're young enough to kill a few sheepmen," Stanley growled. "We'll be along directly."

"Things have changed," Lee said slowly. "It would be a mistake to fight, Frank."

"Meanin' what?" Webb asked sharply.

"You've never been in a range war," Lee anounced. "I have and I've never known either side to win. But with Bruce backin' Rolfe, we're certain to lose. Who'll take care of yore wife, Frank, while you're in jail? Who'll look after yore kids, Earl, and the families of the other ranchers?"

"Makes no difference," Stanley snapped. "Anyhow, I figure that lawman was mostly just talkin'."

"You don't know Bruce," Lee told him. "We stand to lose everything. It's better to let the sheep through. Rolfe's sections are next to my land, so if he tries to spread out, it'll be my lookout. He won't bother you. I say, let him through."

"No sheep are goin' into the Uplands," Stanley stated emphatically. "You tryin' to pull out of the fight, Lee?"

"Easy, Earl," Webb said quickly. "Lee will be there when the shootin' starts." He turned to the young rancher. "I know you're tryin' to find the easiest way out for us, son. But like Earl, I don't figure the marshal will step in. He's warned us because he had to, but that's as far as he'll go. Now get on out to the canyon. We'll get a drink and be along."

Lee saw the futility of further argument and silently turned up the street toward the livery. He knew that the ranchers faced ruin when the first shot was fired. They didn't believe it, and even if they had believed it, their pride wouldn't let them back down. Lee had his pride, too, but his loyalty was stronger. Ahead he saw Bruce leave the livery mounted on a chestnut gelding. When they met, the marshal pulled up and regarded Lee thoughtfully.

After a moment he said, "Old men can be stubborn. And it may be they don't know the cost. I figure you do."

Lee nodded. "I know. Look, marshal, when you step in, I'll be leadin' the ranchers. I ought to satisfy the law."

"When the fight starts," Bruce said shrewdly, "the first men I'll arrest will be Webb and Stanley. I'm on my way to the canyon now."

"Now?"

"I mean to be on hand at the beginnin', so I can take them right off. Think it over, Sullivan. Prison is worse on old men than killin' them outright."

The lawman nodded and rode on. Lee looked after him and bitterness quirked his lips. Bruce had thrown it squarely up to him to prevent the trouble. A thought which had been in the back of Lee's mind since he first realized the futility of the struggle suddenly emerged as the only solution.

He knew a way out, a way which would brand him as a double-crosser to his friends, a way which would cost him his ranch and send him on his way again to face bitter years of loneliness and penury. But after the first moment of indecision, Lee didn't hesitate. Frank Webb and the others had given him everything that he held worth while; their loss was the price of his loyalty. Better that one man should lose than that all should suffer. If what he did was misunderstood, it was, nevertheless, the only way to save the ranchers.

LEE hurried into the barn and, the hostler not being in evidence, saddled his own horse. He was so engrossed in his brooding thought that the first he knew of another's presence was when a mocking voice spoke directly behind him.

"Lee Sullivan—Lucky Lee, they called you over Blue Mesa way."

Lee straightened from tightening the saddle cinch and turned to face Hess Rolfe.

"You was hopin' I hadn't recognized you, wasn't you?" Rolfe grinned wickedly. "I ain't apt to ever forget that mug, though it don't look like Bruce spotted you."

"What do you want, Rolfe?" Lee asked tonelessly.

"I was wonderin' what it would be worth to you for me not to tell Bruce who you are?"

"A good deal, I reckon," Lee said slowly.

"That's what I figured. Bruce is pretty hard when it comes to enforcin' the law. You'd have about twenty years comin' to you."

"Get on with it, Rolfe."

"All right. I don't want the fight in Aurora Canyon to come off. It would be pretty bloody."

"Since when have you given a damn about men bein' killed?"

"Men? To hell with 'em. It's my sheep, I'm thinkin' about. If I drive 'em into the canyon, you damned cowmen will kill hundreds of 'em. Things ain't been goin' so good with me lately and everything I've got is tied up in them three thousand head of sheep."

"You've got the law with you," Lee said. "You always pull yore crookedness just inside the law, like the way you dammed Blue Creek and froze out the little ranchers. Bruce is backin' you."

"But he can't do a thing until fightin' actually starts and when it does, my sheep will be mowed down. That fight ain't comin' off, Sullivan!"

"No?"

"Not if you want to stay out of jail. You'd better get yore friends to let me through."

Lee slowly shook his head. "It can't be done."

"Then yore number's up!" Rolfe said viciously. "I'm goin' after Bruce and tip him off. That'll get one tough gunhand out of my way, anyhow!"

The sheepman turned away and was almost to the door when Lee called him back. Rolfe returned eagerly and gloating triumph was in

his eyes. Lee stood with a hand on his horse, looking at the floor. It had been his intention when he entered the barn to get in touch with Rolfe. He had an inclination to smash the leering sheepman in the mouth for thinking he could be blackmailed, but on this basis it would be simpler to carry out his plans. Lee knew he was through, anyway; the circumstances didn't matter.

"You're a dirty skunk, Rolfe," he said at last. "I swore once I'd kill you. If I ever meet you again, I will. If you don't keep yore sheep on yore land or if you ever cause the Uplands ranchers any trouble, I'll come back and do it. Remember that."

"To hell with you, Sullivan. How soon can you pull the men out of the canyon—"

"There's no chance to do that," Lee said slowly. "But there's another way into the Uplands."

"What!" Rolfe exclaimed. "I never heard of any way but the canyon."

"Polecat Pass ain't never used by the people in this section. For some reason it smells to all hell and it's out of the way. It will take you till dark to drive yore sheep to the entrance. But knowin' you were comin' through the canyon, nobody's guardin' the pass, so there won't be a fight. The pass gives onto the Uplands across a corner of my spread. Yore land lies just beyond."

"It's a cinch," Rolfe grinned. He laughed gloatingly and his crafty eyes bit into Lee's. "I'll need a guide to swing me into the pass. That'll be you, feller."

Thoughtfully Lee rubbed a callus in the palm of his hand and nodded. "All right. I'll see you into the pass. Swing yore herd away from town where it won't be seen and head it west. I'll cut across and meet you in an hour."

"You know," the sheepman warned, "what'll happen if you try to pull anything—"

"Get goin'!" Lee said harshly. "I said I'd see you into the pass."

Rolfe smirked and headed out of the barn. For a long time Lee stood unmoving by his horse. The terrible price he himself would have to pay to save the Uplands was not so much in his mind as regret at what his friends would think was the cause. A slight noise caused him to look up. Before him stood Frank Webb and Earl Stanley! The faces of the two old cattlemen were drawn into harsh lines and both had guns in their hands!

YOU low-down, double-crosser!" Stanley grated. "If we hadn't come in the back way and overheard you, you'd have got away with it."

"It's a trick, ain't it, son?" Webb asked pleadingly. "You jest intended gettin' Rolfe in a trap where we could jump him. That's it, ain't it, Lee?"

Lee looked at Webb and more poignantly than anything in his life, he wished he could reassure the old man. But if they knew the real reason for what he was doing, they wouldn't permit it. Lee slowly shook his head.

"He's sold out to Rolfe," Stanley snapped.

"Naw, he ain't," said Webb. "Lee, if there's somethin' behind you we don't know about, it don't matter none. We'll stand back of you."

"I'm takin' Rolfe through Polecat Pass," Lee said stiffly. "That's all there is to it."

"Not quite," Stanley cut in. "Get on yore horse. We're headin' for the canyon. There'll be a hangin' first,

Continued on page 90

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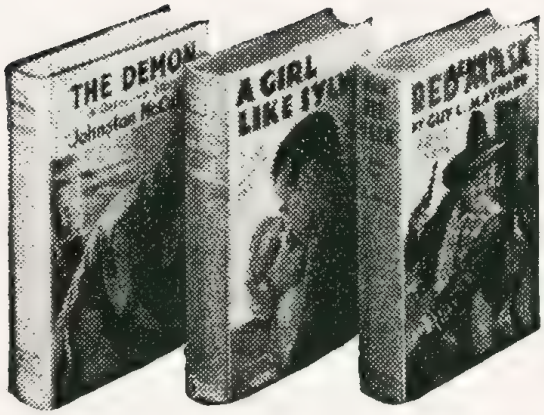

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Continued from page 88

then we'll move the boys to Polecat Pass to wait on yore sheep, friend."

There was only one chance and Lee took it. He dug his thumb hard into the flank of his horse. The big black snorted and whirled into the two men. Lee's hand snapped to his gun and with two lightning-swift slashes he clubbed the weapons out of the old men's hands. They rubbed their smashed knuckles and turned the air blue with curses.

"I'm sorry," Lee said thinly, "that you two had to get in on this. Now that you're in, you're in all the way. You've got to go along to Polecat Pass!"

At the point of his gun, Lee forced the two cattlemen to saddle and mount their horses. He tied their feet beneath their horses' bellies, then quietly led the animals through the back of the barn into the brush beyond. Stanley kept up a constant stream of abuse and recrimination, but Webb's hard, bruised anger was worse. Lee stepped into the saddle and silently herded the grizzled old cowmen before him.

Thirty minutes later they sighted a great dust cloud and shortly afterward came upon the spearhead of the sheep drive. The woollies, hazed by hard-riding herders, seemed to flow in swirling eddies across the landscape, and when Webb and Stanley caught the stench of hated sheep their swearing made all former efforts pale by comparison.

"You don't know it," Lee said curtly, "but there are worse things even than sheep."

Rolfe had sighted the three ranchers and called a half dozen men to him before riding to meet them. The sheepman rode up warily and his face was dark with suspicion.

"What's the idea of bringing them along?" he snapped at Lee. "If you're layin' a trap—"

"Shut up, Rolfe," Lee answered. "The idea is they heard us talkin' in the barn and I had to bring 'em along."

Rolfe saw then that the men's feet were tied and grinned sardonically. "This ain't quite the welcome I was expectin' from you cowmen," he said. "Shore nice of you to come along to help me with my drive. Lee Sullivan always was a smart hombre. We're old—"

"Drop it!" Lee said curtly. "I made a bargain with you, Rolfe. Get on with it. Keep these men under guard while I point the drive."

Webb and Stanley, escorted by armed herders, were taken to the rear of the sheep band and the drive got under way again. Lee rode point with Rolfe and for the rest of the hot afternoon the sheep were shoved ahead fast. The sun was setting when Lee swung the point into the narrow opening of Polecat Pass. It widened beyond the entrance into a broad valley of exceptional beauty.

The sun struck brilliant colors of red, yellow, and purple from its walls. The grass was long and lush, and millions of multicolored flowers bloomed against the dark green of the valley floor. It was a valley of paradise—except for one thing. The slight breeze stirred an odor so vile it was almost nauseating. It seemed to rise from the ground with the stench of a million rotten eggs and to cling in the nostrils with sickening effect.

"Whoever named this pass sold it short," Rolfe shouted at Lee. "No self-respectin' polecat would come in here."

"It's full of 'em, now," Lee answered shortly.

Rolfe yelled at his men to turn the herd and hold it. In a few min-

utes the whole tremendous band was in the valley and slowly milling to a stop. Then the sheep spread out and began to graze. Webb and Stanley rode in, dust covered and so enraged they had even ceased swearing. Lee rode over to them and in a moment was joined by Rolfe. The sheepman was in high spirits but still wary.

"Figurin' to wait till daylight to drive on?" Lee asked.

"That's right," Rolfe answered. "And I ain't figurin' on havin' these men get loose to—"

"Don't tell me my business," Lee said shortly. "We stay here until just before daylight. After that you're on yore own."

"By hell," Webb roared, "it's bad enough to smell stinkin' sheep, but if you think I'm goin' to stay in this damn valley all night—"

"There's no help for it, Frank," Lee said gently. "You've got to stay."

"There's just one thing I want before I die," Stanley whipped out. "I want to get you between the sights of a gun, Sullivan!"

SUPPER was cooked and soon Rolfe's men rolled in their blankets. Every blade of grass that was crushed sent up a nauseating stench that caused the men to swear and grumble. Rolfe wanted to tie the old cattlemen up, but Lee wouldn't permit it. He sat himself, to watch them and several times during the night had to warn them when they tried to slip away.

Throughout the long hours, Lee sat with his back against his saddle. The night herders lounged carelessly on a rise overlooking the sheep band, for after feeding, the sheep had bedded down and not so much as a bleat was heard from them the rest of the night.

Just before daylight Lee caught up his and the cowmen's horses. He noticed they followed him with drooping heads and stood dejectedly while he saddled. It struck him as strange, but he forgot about it when Rolfe threw wood onto the fire and faced him. Webb and Stanley pulled on their boots and stood up.

"Let's ride," Lee said. "Be daylight in fifteen minutes."

"I ain't worried about you, Sullivan," Rolfe said. "You know what's good for you. But I want these two men to stay with me till I get to the Uplands."

"I've kept my bargain with you, Rolfe," Lee said flatly. "We're ridin'."

"The hell you are!" Rolfe snapped. "They'll get their men and maybe jump me before I'm ready."

Lee's eyes slitted to glinting pin points. "I've gone along with you as far as I'm goin', Rolfe," he said softly. "I said we're ridin'!"

The sheepman's hand leaped toward his gun. All in one movement, it cleared leather and spun out of his hand. Lee grinned thinly through the swirling smoke from his gun muzzle and said, "You've got to be faster than that, Rolfe. You ought to've known. Tell yore men to get back or you'll learn I can still drill a man through the heart."

Rolfe waved the men who were rolling out of their blankets away and glowered at Lee. "All right, go ahead. But if anything happens, it's yore funeral."

The three ranchers mounted and rode out of the valley. They tried to push their horses but the animals were sluggish and dispirited. No one spoke for a long time. The sun came up and at last Lee broke the silence.

"I know things don't look good," he said. "But I want you—espe-

cially you, Frank—to know what I did was for yore good. You'll maybe understand it some day. I'll be ridin' on when we get back to town."

"Maybe you will," Stanley bit out, "if I can't get hold of a gun first. I aim—"

Stanley broke off as his horse suddenly went down and threw the old rancher over his head. Lee jerked his horse to his haunches and the animal went all the way over. As Lee cleared the saddle he saw Webb stumble out of the way of his falling mount.

"What the hell!" Lee growled.

While the three puzzled men looked on, their horses kicked feebly and in a moment were dead. "It's a dirty sheepman's trick," Stanley burst out. "He poisoned our horses."

"I'll kill Rolfe for poisonin' my horse," Lee said harshly.

"Right now you'll walk to town," Webb said briefly. "You can thank yore friend for that."

They had walked a half mile on fast-blistering feet when ahead of them they saw a horseman top a rise, riding fast. In a few minutes Marshal Bruce rode up. He looked at them questioningly, but he had seen too much of life to betray surprise.

"I've been wondering where you gentlemen were," Bruce said. "I spent the night in the Canyon and am glad to say there has been no trouble."

"This Sullivan sidewinder sold us out," Stanley snapped. "He showed Rolfe another way into the Uplands."

Bruce turned his inscrutable eyes on Lee and said, "So that's it. I picked up the trail of Rolfe's sheep and was followin' it to see what happened."

"I want to swear out some warrants, Marshal," Webb said stonily. "Against Sullivan for assault and kidnapin' and against Rolfe for poisonin'—"

Sound of a hard-ridden horse came from behind them. The ranchers whirled and saw Rolfe coming at breakneck speed. Even as they watched, his horse went down and threw the sheepman far over his head. Rolfe rolled to his feet and ran forward. When he got close they saw that his eyes were burning with feverish intensity and rage had carried him to the verge of insanity.

"Arrest Sullivan, Marshal!" he howled. "Arrest the dirty—"

"Easy, man," Bruce said. "What's he done now?"

"Done! He poisoned my sheep! The whole drove is dead! I'm ruined! That crook tricked me and poisoned my sheep!"

LEE looked at the sheepman as though he were crazy. Webb and Stanley didn't care about anything except that the sheep were dead and their amazement was already turning to unrestrained joy. "You mean to say *all* yore sheep are dead?" Webb shouted.

"You know they are, damn you!" Rolfe fumed. "It was a trick! Arrest Sullivan, Bruce!"

"Well, Sullivan," Bruce said, "what about it?"

"How the hell do I know?" Lee demanded angrily. "Sheep ain't fit for nothin' but buzzards, but I didn't poison 'em. I showed Rolfe the way through Polecat Pass into the Uplands so there wouldn't be a war, but ain't no crime in that."

"Maybe we'd better get back to the Pass and see what happened," Bruce said.

"Not me," Webb yelled gleefully. "Me and Earl are goin' on to town

to spread the news. No sheep and no war." In an undertone he said to Lee, "Son, when I get through you're gonna be a hero on this range."

"But I didn't poison the damned sheep!" Lee protested indignantly.

Webb winked. "Didn't you? Well, I been thinkin' some hard things about you which I aim to set right. I'll see you in town."

"We was wrong all right," Stanley grinned. "But if you ever tell it that we rode drag on a sheep drive, I'll still gun you."

With Lee and Rolfe walking, Bruce had to hold his horse in, so it took them an hour and a half to reach the Pass. The herders were bunched in a hard-faced, dangerous group. The sheep were dead to the last animal. They lay stretched on their sides, a great blob of motionless, dirty-gray color. Lee looked at them in wonder while Bruce rode completely around the stiffening bodies. He seemed more interested in the valley itself, however, and when he returned a deep frown was on his face.

"There's the evidence!" Rolfe shouted wildly. "Take Sullivan in before I kill him!"

"You'd better hold yourself in, Rolfe," Bruce said. "I know what killed yore sheep. I saw another valley like this once, but it was supposed to be the only one in the country. See that jack rabbit yonder? He's runnin' across the valley like he was chased by the devil. Yonder's another one ain't got any idea of stoppin'. You'll notice there ain't any bees botherin' with the flowers and there ain't a single bird in sight."

Bruce paused and there was a suggestion of a twinkle in his eye. "Sheep ain't got as much sense as wild animals. The soil in this valley is full of stuff called selenium. Selenium is poison as hell and plants

HERE'S THE ANSWER TO

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draw it up out of the ground in concentrated form. Them sheep filled up on poison grass."

"Sullivan knew about it!" Rolfe cried. "He—"

"I wouldn't have poisoned my horse for yore whole damned herd of sheep," Lee broke in angrily. "I didn't know this valley was poisoned."

"I'm afraid, Rolfe," said Bruce, "there's no way to hold Sullivan. You came in here of yore own will and there's no way to prove what was in his mind. It wouldn't hold in court."

"But you can hold him on another count!" Rolfe screamed frenziedly. "That man is Lee Sullivan, Lucky Lee Sullivan, wanted by the government for his part in the Blue Mesa war!"

SO?" Bruce grunted and his eyes were hard. Lee sighed wearily. He had known there was no way out for him, but he was grateful that his friends wouldn't have to remember him as a double-crosser.

"You *know* he's Sullivan!" Rolfe raged. "You never forget a face!"

"That's just half of it, Rolfe," said Bruce. "I never forget a face or a fact. I had left Blue Mesa when evidence of Lee Sullivan's death was brought to the authorities, but I recall all the details. His saddle was brought in with his guns across it. There was a body, too, but it was so far gone it couldn't be recognized. Still the government paid the reward money on the evidence presented. It would go hard with the man who got that money by fraud. Are you still sure, Rolfe, this man here is the same Lee Sullivan?"

Rolfe's loose mouth worked convulsively. His men were shifting restlessly behind him and finally frustration and hate drove him beyond reason. With a hoarse curse he snatched for his gun and several of his men backed him. But Lee and Bruce slashed downward with their hands and together their guns roared. Lee smashed Rolfe's hand with a slug while Bruce broke the arm of the one of the gunmen.

"Hold it!" Bruce roared, and in the face of that deadly pair of guns the sheepmen froze. "The law backed yore rights, Rolfe, but now I'll kill you quick as I would a rattlesnake. You men drop yore gun belts and get out of here!"

"You mean—walk?" Rolfe asked feebly.

"Walk!" Bruce snapped. "And keep walkin' till you're clear of this range. Now get goin'!"

Several minutes later Hess Rolfe, broken and beaten, stumbled ahead of his men out of the valley. Bruce rubbed his chin and regarded Lee thoughtfully. Finally he spoke—in a contemplative tone.

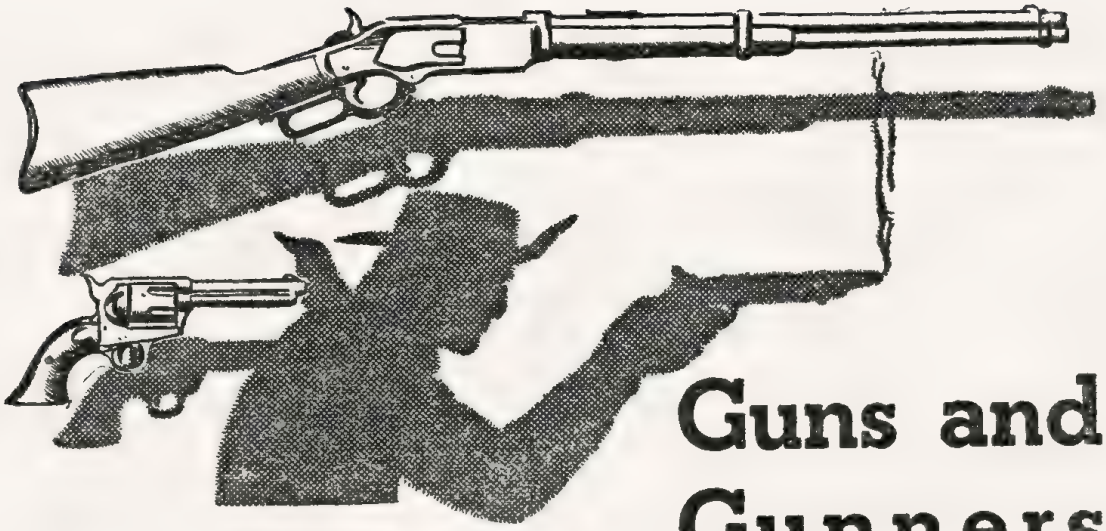
"By stavin' off war you saved this range more than it'll ever know. Only a man who's been in a range war would know that. But Lucky Lee Sullivan was proved dead. Funny you've got the same name."

Lee drew the first easy breath he had known in days. "Yeah," he said. "Ain't it funny? You had breakfast, Marshal? It ain't far through the valley to my place. If you'll let me get on behind you, we can ride up and I'll fix you a meal to remember."

Bruce looked at the dead sheep and all at once he smiled. "Can I count on it not bein' full of poison?"

"Well, I don't know," Lee grinned. "Seems like nature's got a sure way of gettin' rid of varmints."

THE END.



Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

A FEW months ago we mentioned in this department that Damascus shotgun barrels, including the various types known as twist and laminated steel barrels, were unsafe to use with modern ammunition. As a result, a great many readers wrote in, stating that they had been using this material in their old guns for many years without trouble.

On the other hand, many other readers complimented us highly on the article and still others inquired further on the subject, and even ammunition manufacturers wrote in approvingly. One letter read in part:

"I wish I had read your article a year ago. I was under the impression that the standard, smokeless powder load—not the high-velocity number—was perfectly safe to use in my old field gun. This was a good grade of gun originally, costing about a hundred and fifty dollars some thirty years ago, and appeared to be in perfect condition. A few months ago, while I was using a standard shell of which I have shot many hundreds through these barrels, one tube let go, completely wrecking the gun. As a result, my left hand is now shy a portion of the thumb and two fingers. I heartily agree with you that these barrels are unsafe, but I found it out too late."

On all ammunition boxes printed recently, there is a very definite warning stating that none of these loads should be used with Damascus, twist, or laminated steel barrels.

In commenting upon this situation, a friend of mine recently wrote and suggested: "Write something more in your magazine about present-day powder markings. We know that present-day markings are in black powder language. You would be surprised at the letters we get from people who tell us that they 'measured the powder' in one of our maximum loads and there were *not* 3¾ drams of powder in the shell.

"You could write a whole column on this subject of present-day powder markings, pointing out the difference between the two types of powder used today—that is, the fast-burning powder and the progressive-burning powder—and the approximate amounts of these powders used as compared with what is marked on the shell.

"There are just hundreds of fellows who see 'three drams' marked on the top shot wad and immedi-

ately conclude that there are three drams by *volume measure* of powder in that shell. The same is true of all other shell markings and I know that there are lots of accidents that we don't hear about when some farmer cuts open a couple of maximum loads, takes the black powder measure and loads himself a load of 3½ or 3¾ drams *by bulk*, of that powder which was loaded by the manufacturer entirely by weight."

To make this marking situation quite clear, the original shot shells were, of course, black powder numbers. They made their appearance before smokeless powder was developed. Black powder is entirely different from smokeless in design, appearance, bulk, weight, and performance.

It was the custom in these old shells to load a standard, twelve-gauge shell with three drams by weight of black powder and 1⅛ ounces of shot. The coming of smokeless powder meant something else, again. The first smokeless was a bulk powder, extremely soft in grain and mild in its characteristics. It could be loaded bulk-for-bulk with black powder. In other words, a measure which held three drams of black powder could be used to load bulk smokeless, although the weight would be slightly less. In those days, most of the shooters reloaded their own shot shells.

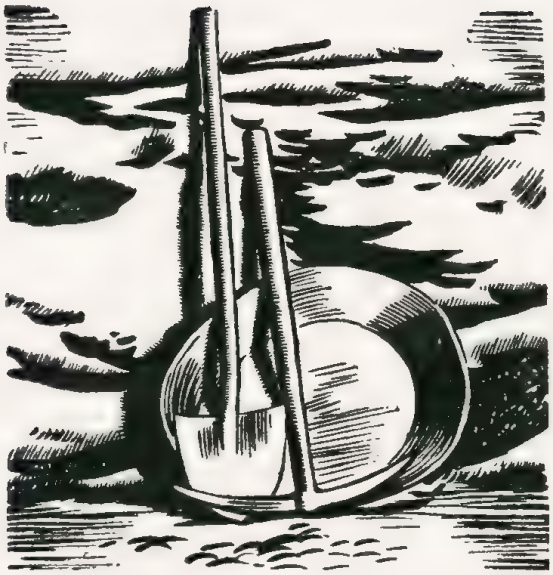
Later on bulk powder underwent a change, and while it was still a soft-grain type, it could be loaded by bulk measure, but required somewhat less powder to perform the same results. Then came the dense powders. Bulk powders as a rule, can be crumbled on a hard surface beneath a thumb nail. Dense powders are gelatinized, similar to celluloid and cannot be mashed under normal pressure. Performance is entirely different and, weight for weight, the bulk powders will deliver far greater pressures and much higher power. Accordingly, it took less powder to load these. Shot shells, due to the old black powder system, were thus labeled "three drams *equivalent*." This system of marking is still used today.

Black powder barrels were thick, heavy barrels, the thickness of the metal extending from the breech to the muzzle. This was necessary, since black powder develops a steady gradual pressure extending clear to the muzzle of the gun. Smokeless powder develops its maximum pressure within the first two or three inches as the shot charge moves down the barrel, gradually dropping off. Hence, smokeless powder barrels are thick at the breech and quite thin at the muzzle.

Shotguns designed for black powder will not stand smokeless powders, even though they are made of quality steels. Laminated, twist, and Damascus steel barrels are not quality steel but a mixture of iron and steel twisted together.

If you are interested in making a cartridge collection and would like to hear from other collectors, write to this department, inclosing a three-cent stamp for a list of names which will be sent to you as soon as it is compiled. In this way you may be able to trade some of your duplicates with others for something you really need for your collection.

This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns And Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. *Be sure you inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.*



Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

Asbestos, that strange fibrous rock that can be woven into non-combustible heat-resisting cloth, gloves and so forth, has many other highly important industrial uses as well. As one of the main components of brake linings and clutch facings, lack of asbestos would seriously upset the automotive industry. Steam-driven machines, such as railroad locomotives, need it for gaskets and valve packings. It is prominently employed in building construction, both home and factory, as a heat insulator. Not to mention its importance as a roofing material constituent.

In other words, the discovery of a good commercial grade deposit of asbestos in the United States today, would be a timely and very valuable find. Right now this country, although the largest asbestos consumer in the world, produces only about six percent of its requirements of that mineral. Asbestos is a deficiency mineral as far as the United States is concerned.

We have some asbestos deposits in this country. We need more badly. So the prospector in the field today should keep his eyes peeled for chrysotile, the mineralogist's name for asbestos. A good find of the stuff would be more than money-making; it would virtually come under the head of a national service.

All of which is in answer to J. C. G., of Detroit, Michigan, who recently queried us on the subject. "Maybe I am wrong," he wrote, "but it seems to me that a good find of asbestos ought to be worth money. Are there any asbestos mines or deposits in this country now? If so, where? In what States has it already been found? What does the rock in its natural form, look like?"

J. C. G. is far from wrong. And although many isolated occurrences of asbestos have been noted in the United States in widely scattered sections of the country, deposits of commercial importance seem as scarce as hen's teeth. Perhaps because heretofore, sufficient consistent search for them has not been widespread.

Right now the largest asbestos producer in this country is up in Eden, Vermont. Other growing asbestos producers are in Gila County, Arizona. Then, too, asbestos deposits have been worked near Pylesville, Maryland, in Placer County, California, and Glenrock, Wyoming. That gives an idea of how scattered are the deposits that have already been found in the United States. Occurrences of the mineral are known to exist in Alabama, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, Idaho, Massachusetts, Michigan, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virgina,

Washington, and Wisconsin.

The difficulty is not in finding specimens of asbestos. Rather it lies in locating a large-size deposit capable of economical development, such as are the extensive deposits in Quebec, Canada, and from which most of the asbestos and asbestos products in the United States are obtained. Another difficulty lies in finding asbestos of the higher-priced, long-fiber type. For instance, the Vermont deposits, though plenty large, can only supply fibers of moderate to short length, little of which can be used for spinning. On the other hand, the deposits now being worked in Arizona afford excellent crude fiber. But there the factors that have to be overcome are relatively high mining costs, and heavy shipping rates to Eastern markets.

All these things are important economic considerations that the modern prospector must bear in mind in considering the probable value and commercial feasibility of any new discovery of a deposit of a mineral such as asbestos, that must be sold in an open competitive market.

Chrysotile, the asbestos mineral itself, is readily recognizable because of its unique, distinctive form and appearance—a rock that has a silky, somewhat greasy appearance and the thin fibers of which can be pulled apart with the fingers and twisted into slender threads. The color of the rock is commonly olive to darker green, the rock being one of the forms of serpentine. The threads themselves are usually whitish, or gray. The rock is about as heavy as quartz, and fairly soft. A copper coin will scratch serpentine.

Asbestos is found in igneous rocks, and in rock formations that have been subject to, and changed by earth pressures and heat in by-gone geological eras—metamorphic rocks. True asbestos, that is, the fibrous form of the mineral, is often found as veins of varying thickness traversing masses or large bodies of common serpentine rock—a mineral that can be identified by its greenish, often mottled appearance and its comparative softness, plus its greasy, waxlike luster.

Incidentally, asbestos has recently been classified by the Army and Navy Munitions Board as a "critical mineral," a war necessity. That alone, is sufficient indication of its importance, and of the importance with which a new, workable commercial deposit in this country would be received.

To G. J., Hamilton, Ohio: According to the United States Bureau of Mines Minerals Yearbook for 1939, "Mine production of gold in the United States (Territories included), set a new annual record in 1938, surpassing the former record made in 1915 by 352,336 ounces in quantity and $81,370,691 in value." The most important gold-producing countries in the world are the Union of South Africa, Soviet Russia, Canada and continental United States, in that order.

● We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.

The Hollow Tree

By HELEN RIVERS

Laurene Gemmaka had a letter published in the Old Holla some time ago and has a word of thanks to say to us all. She writes: "Just a few lines to thank you for publishing my letter. I received so many replies that I wasn't able to answer them all as much as I wanted to, but I thank you all from the bottom of my heart for helping me keep my chin up and making my life lots brighter. I am now a *cheerful* shut-in and I wish each and every one of you the best of luck and much happiness."

George is interested in everything—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a young fellow and would very much like to make some Pen Pals. I am interested in all sorts of things and will answer all letters.—George Whittaker, Jr., 358—2nd Avenue, Verdun, Quebec, Canada

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Write to this lonely mother—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I enjoy your column very much and would like to make some pen friends, if possible. I am a widow thirty-eight years old and have two grown sons, fifteen and eighteen years old. I just recently lost my husband and am naturally very lonely. I will appreciate and answer all letters.—Berthé Mikesell, 291 E. 48th Street, Los Angeles, California

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Letters from the West wanted here—

Dear Miss Rivers:
Would you please help me find a pen friend in the United States? I would especially like to hear from cowboys and cowgirls and those living in the Northern States, but nobody is barred and I promise to answer all letters. I am a ship's cook, and my hobbies are photography and wood carving. I also like the movies, and my favorite star is Bill Boyd.—James Hynes, 13H, Markievicz House, Lombard Street, East Dublin, Ireland

---

Patricia is a jitterbug—

Dear Miss Rivers:
Hear ye! Hear ye! This is a plea from a girl who likes to write letters. Now I know a lot of you folks enjoy corresponding, so here I am just begging for your letters. I am fifteen years old and like all kinds of dancing, especially jitterbugging, and my favorite sports are horseback riding, cycling and basketball. I will answer all letters and that old saying, "the more, the merrier," applies here.—Patricia Daly, 581 Walnut Street, Elizabeth, New Jersey

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Arvid has been a friend of the Hollow Tree for many years—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I have been reading the Hollow Tree since 1915, but this is the first time I have written to you. I am a lonely young man of thirty-five and would like to hear from those between twenty and forty years old. I am a student of psychology and would like to have letters from those who think we might have something in common. I will answer all and exchange snapshots.—Arvid Anderson, 236 South 3rd Street, Lindsborg, Kansas

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Ruth is musically inclined—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am entering my plea for Pen Pals from everywhere. I am eighteen years old, have just finished high school, play the piano and Hawaiian guitar, like dancing, horseback riding, football and basketball, and my hobby is

short-story writing. Here's hoping everyone writes to me.—Ruth Jenkins, Sylvester Drive, Moultrie, Georgia

Charles will swap stamps—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am thirty-nine years old and would like to have some Pen Pals from the Hawaiian Islands and south of the Rio Grande, although I will be glad to hear from anybody no matter what age, nationality or sex from the North to the South Pole. I am interested in stamp collecting and would appreciate it if some of you pals would send me stamps from anywhere except the United States. I will do the same for you.—Charles D. Arledge, 201 N. Broadway, Urbana, Illinois

This letter comes from Australia—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Is there anyone who would like to correspond with an "Aussie"? I am twenty-two years old and interested in general topics. I would like to hear from pals in all countries and will exchange stamps.—Betty Evans, Heywood, Victoria, Australia

Nora's hobby is collecting pencils—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Would somebody please write to a lonely girl from Minnesota. I am twenty-one years old and my favorite pastimes are writing and sketching. As a hobby I collect pencils and have quite a number of them. I promise to answer all letters and exchange snapshots. I would like especially to hear from foreign countries, so come on, boys and girls, write me.—Nora Cloutier, 515 La Bree Avenue, North, Thief River Falls, Minnesota

Lloyd can tell you a thing or two about horses—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am nineteen years old and would like to make some pen friends. I am an ex-jockey, so it isn't hard to understand my interest in horses. I enjoy writing letters, dancing and singing. I have traveled through thirty-four of our States and like the West the best. I will tell all who are interested anything they want to know about horses.—Lloyd Lushene, 1625 N. Maplewood, Chicago, Illinois

And this pal has some timberland for sale—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I wonder if you would publish the following for me. I have one hundred and sixty acres of timber in Oregon that I thought might interest some readers of the Hollow Tree. It's a half mile from the road and about three miles from the railroad. It has between three and four million feet of timber, one hundred acres old growth and sixty of second growth. I am willing to sell it very cheaply and wish anyone interested would write to me for full particulars. I am also interested in having some Pen Pals and will answer all letters.—Mrs. Rubie Tate, Rt. No. 3, Hart, Michigan

Here's a combined plea from three pals—

Dear Miss Rivers:

We are three lonely Arkansas boys in a CCC camp in Idaho who would like to receive letters from all over the world. We can tell you a lot about the good old West and about camp life in the CCC. We promise to answer all letters and exchange snapshots.—Harold E. Reed, Otto Stroud and George Dillin, Company 5702, CCC Camp, Pierce, Idaho

Robert wants letters from everywhere—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have enjoyed many an hour that otherwise would have been dull by reading Western Story Magazine, and I would appreciate it if you would put this request in the Hollow Tree. I am in a CCC camp and would like to correspond with some Pen Pals. I'd enjoy hearing from all parts of the world and would like some snapshots of interesting places. Everyone is welcome to write and I will answer all letters.—Robert Douglas, Company 3736, CCC Camp, Canton, Missouri

Our West interests this South African miss—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a South African girl twenty years old and I would like some Pen Pals from twenty to thirty years of age living in the United States. I have an uncle who has just returned from your great West where he learned how to be a cowboy and he has told us so much about the wonderful time he had that I am especially interested in hearing from cowboys and cowgirls. My favorite sports are hiking and tennis, and I also enjoy singing. I will answer all letters, so come on and write to me.—Mick Niekerk, Loskiul, Private Bag, Via Bathaville, O. F. S., South Africa

Harry is here for a second visit—

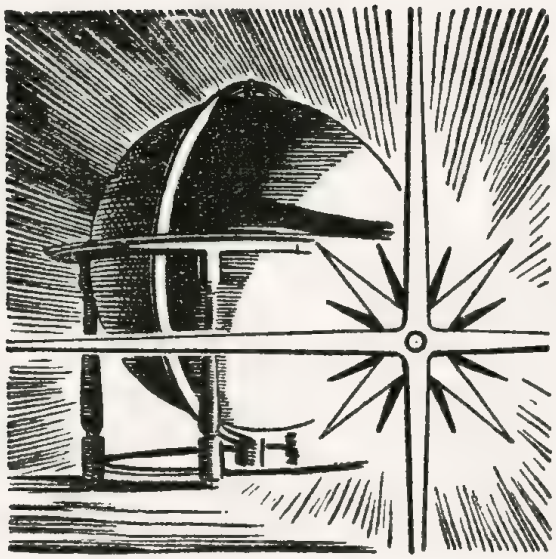
Dear Miss Rivers:

Eight years ago, while doing duty in Honolulu, you published a letter for me in the Hollow Tree. Through the years I have lost contact with most of the Pen Pals I made through that letter and now would appreciate it if you would get me some more. I am twenty-eight years old, in the navy and writing letters is one of my hobbies. The other is photography, in which I do free lance work which I sell to several magazines and papers. Knowing the response to the letters you publish, I have laid in a large supply of snapshots which I will send to all who inclose a picture in their letter.—Harry Tomplins, Receiving Station, Navy Yard, Cavite, Philippine Islands

Mildred wants lots of mail—

Dear Miss Rivers;

Hello, folks! Here's a lonesome girl who would like some Pen Pals. I am eighteen years old, like all sports and also enjoy traveling. Come on, boys and girls, how about filling my mail box? I promise to answer all letters.—Mildred Davidson, R. R. No. 1, Kingman, Alberta, Canada



Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

Texas is about as typically a Western State as can be found anywhere, and is, of course, larger than any other State in the Union. There are still big ranches as there were in the old days, and a lot of beef is raised on them. However, ranching is not the only flourishing industry in Texas, and there is much to see besides the large, well-run cattle spreads.

J. J., of Chicago, writes, "I want to go down to Texas and settle somewhere in a section where I can have room to turn around, and where I can recover from a case of weak lungs. I don't want to see empty rangeland exclusively, but should like a mixture of as many varieties of scenery as is possible in one place. I have been attracted to the neighborhood of San Antonio, and I would appreciate it if you would tell me something of things in that vicinity."

That's easy, J. J., because you have picked out an interesting section of the Lone Star State to visit. You will have no regrets, whether you stay a short time or settle there.

San Antonio itself is an old town around which revolved much of the early history of Texas, and there are many historic buildings still standing. This picturesque city, with its ideal climate, has been a popular wintering place for many years, and its quaint old Spanish architecture and atmosphere and its pleasing climate, continue to attract a great many people every year.

However, despite its appearance, San Antonio is a growing city and is rapidly becoming a very important commercial and manufacturing center, all without detracting from its restful charm.

In the country surrounding the town you will find plenty to occupy you if you love the outdoors. There is good hunting to be had, plenty of fishing or tramping in the hills, and there are mountains where one may take his gear and camp out as long as he pleases.

Wild deer, quail, squirrel and other small game lure the hunter into the woods and in nearby waters there are plenty of bass and other game fish to attract the fisherman.

The most important of the fishing waters in the neighborhood are those of Medina Lake, which is located in the foothills of the beautiful Bandera Mountains, only about thirty-five

If you are visiting the Southwest and want road maps or an illustrated booklet about San Antonio, send a stamped envelope to John North and he will tell you where to get them free.

miles outside the city.

Medina Lake is a large man-made lake which was created in 1913, through the formation of the Medina Irrigation Project. Medina Dam made it possible to store water in one of the most beautiful lakes in the country. It is nineteen miles long, and has an irregular shore line in the foothills, cut by innumerable small, cool, mountain streams. The lake is alive with bass, trout and other fish which are planted there in great lots.

Following up the fishing angle, one may explore the Medina River itself. It rises seventy-five miles to the northwest of the city, and there are a number of fine smaller streams flowing into it, all providing good fishing.

After he has had his fill of fishing or hunting, the visitor should take his time and make a careful study of the city itself, for it is full of interest. Of course, no one would want to miss the Alamo, that famous old Texas landmark which is known throughout the world as the shrine of Texas liberty.

As to cultural activities in and around the city, there is no more interesting experience than to join in or watch the fiestas of one kind or another, that take place in the city at various times of the year. The carnivals in San Antonio have few rivals in pageantry.

One of the most important of the festivals is the anniversary of Texas freedom, which takes place annually and lasts a week. Then the whole city decks itself in holiday clothes and flowers, starts its parades, and bands playing, and gives itself over to a week of gaiety.

The city is a melting pot of many nationalities, and for this reason there can be seen many festivals of foreign origin. Besides the annual Indian Summer festival, taking place in the Plaza and in Huisache Bowl, a theater with a rustic stage at Mission San José, there is the Matachines dance which is put on by the Mexicans, and their famous Posadas. The Belgian people there put on their Kermis, the Germans their song fests, and the French and Italians, too, have their own festivals. Civic operas and other musical events are also held outdoors.

In this picturesque city modern skyscraper business buildings set in busy shopping districts, furnish a startling contrast to other sections where it seems that time has stood still. Old Mexican women sit outside their houses and grind their corn between stones and pat tortillas by hand as they have done for hundreds of years.

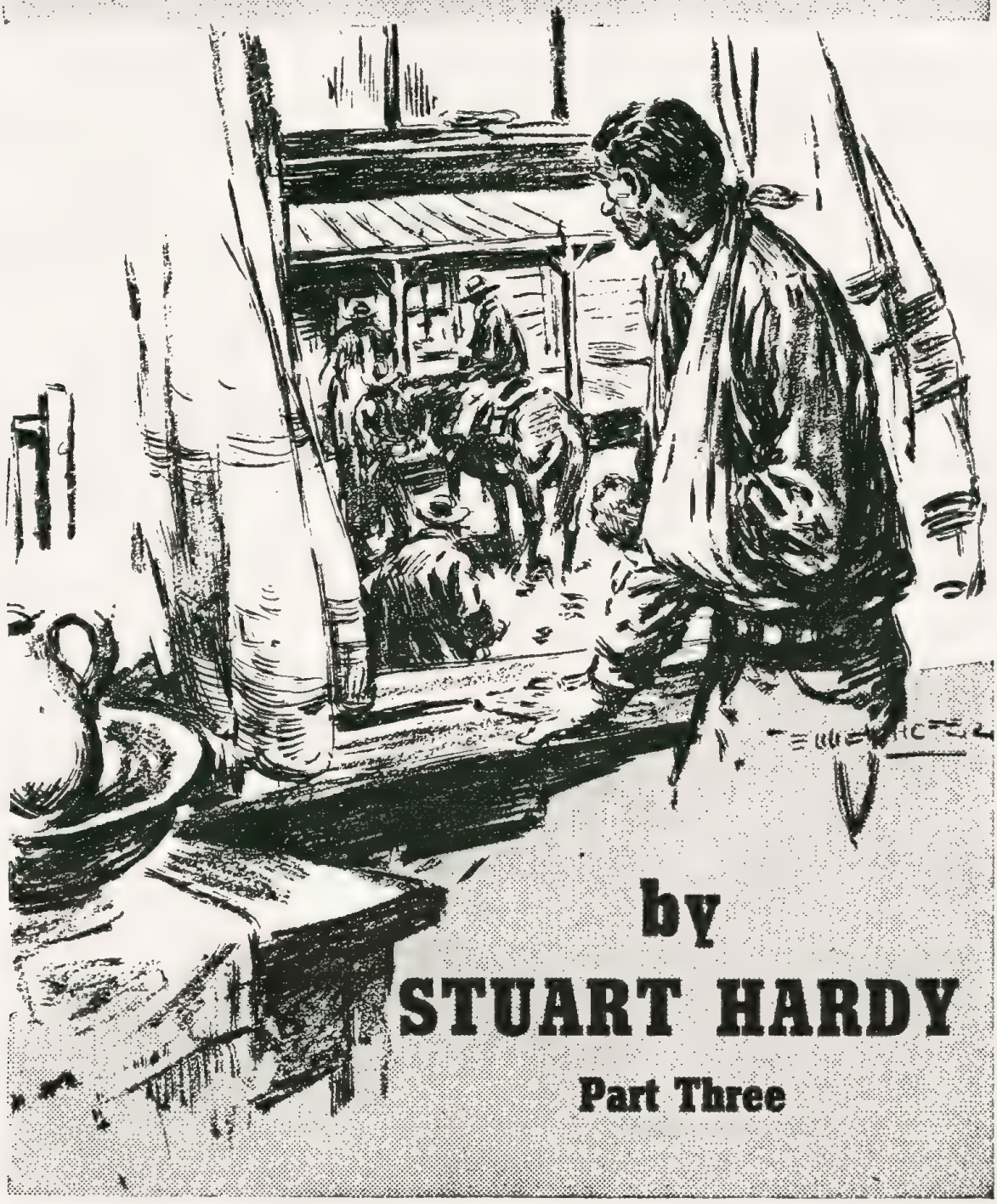
In fact, in the native quarter, the visitor can easily believe himself in a foreign country, for the foods, the native dress, the shops and the theaters are all different from the American, and might well be a piece of Mexico brought intact, and put down here.

San Antonio is truly a delightful place for anybody to visit or to make his permanent home. We hope you will enjoy it, J. J.

● We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

MURDERS AT MESQUITE FLATS



by

STUART HARDY

Part Three

The Story So Far:

Mrs. Katherine Lenroot, who owns the only sheep ranch in the country around Mesquite Flats and whose husband, Nevada Bill Lenroot, had been lynched a year before by a group of unidentified cattlemen, is informed by Soapy Dolan, a cowman, that he intends to bring cattle into the valley which she uses as winter range, a measure tantamount to forcing her out.

Sam Squam, Mrs. Lenroot's foreman, decides to try to enlist the aid of other cattlemen against Dolan. Before he can speak to any of them, however, Mesquite Flats is involved in a murder mystery. The bodies of three cattlemen, Ab Krassel, Cal Gordon and Skinny Jim Bale are found, all shot in the back. Around the neck of each man is a noose with a slip of paper attached, reading, "Remember Lenroot?"

Neither Sheriff Ingersol, who is handling the case, nor Len Foster of the Border Patrol, who is assisting him, make any headway toward solving the murders. Sam Squam does some investigating on his own and comes to believe that Gail Duke, a newcomer in Mesquite Flats, can shed some light on the mystery.

CHAPTER XII

NEVADA BILL'S CHILDREN

Of the three people in Sam Squam's room, Katherine Lenroot was the first to recover her wits. She began, "I never expected to see you here! What—"

Gail darted a frightened glance at Sam. Her hand sprang out in an impulsive gesture toward Mrs. Lenroot. "I . . . I've got to talk to you! My room is just down the hall."

Her husky stammer was a plea. Sam couldn't help gaping from one woman to the other.

"Ruth," Mrs. Lenroot declared. "You're the last person in the world I expected to meet here!"

Ruth!

A sense of vague, yet terrible misgiving crept into Sam. It began to pound in him. He didn't understand the meaning of the "Ruth." Yet it was clear the girl had lied about her name. She was masquerading. And at a time like this any masquerader in Mesquite Flats must be suspected.

As for the girl herself, she colored hotly. He could see her teeth press her lip in consternation.

"Please! I . . . I'll explain," she said hastily. "In . . . in my room."

"Of course." Stiffly Mrs. Lenroot turned to Sam. "I'll be back soon."

He nodded, watched them leave. From the threshold Gail Duke—or was it Ruth?—sent him a glance full of contrition. Then she hurried on with Katherine Lenroot. In a moment he heard her door close.

Filling his lungs, Sam Squam gazed dazedly out into the rain. It was with a sense of actual pain that he considered Gail Duke now. "By thunder," he thought, "seems like there's *nobody* an hombre can be sure of any more!"

Curiosity concerning the girl gnawed at him. He rose, paced the room twice. Despite the handicap of the left arm in a sling, he managed to roll himself a cigarette. And he was smoking nervously when he saw the excitement in the street.

Big Jeff Larkin, the owner of the harness store, galloped into town. His horse was splattered with mud. So, for that matter, was Jeff. He dismounted in front of his shop, slipping and almost falling. Within a few minutes a crowd of about twenty, ignoring the rain, had gathered about him, and Jeff was talking vehemently.

From his window Sam couldn't hear what was going on. He frowned down at his bandaged shoulder. He could endure just so much mystery, he told himself grimly. The matter of Gail Duke and Mrs. Lenroot was enough. No

need to start guessing about Jeff Larkin's news, too.

Sam went down the stairs. The rain, scarcely more than a drizzle now, caused him a slight shudder when he stepped out of the door. He kept close to the saloon's wall to avoid mud. But he couldn't avoid it when he crossed the road toward Larkin's place. His boots sank ankle deep.

"What's up?" he asked, joining the crowd.

A young cowpuncher, Hippy Kane, turned to him in uneasy tension. "Hoke Kerrigan's missin'!"

Sam was stunned. Yet he had anticipated something like this ever since he'd learned that Kerrigan had been riding with Skinny Jim Bale.

"I went with the sheriff," Jeff Larkin was telling another newcomer in the crowd. "Over at the Kerrigan place they said Hoke left with Skinny Jim early in the mornin'. They was aimin' to go to Crawford's. Rance Crawford himself came along while we was there. He says Hoke an' Skinny Jim left his spread long 'fore the rain started. But Kerrigan ain't home yet. No sign o' him or his hoss anywhere."

"Where's the sheriff now?" Hippy Kane called.

"He rounded up all the rannies on Kerrigan's outfit, an' they're ridin' over every inch o' mud between Kerrigan's spread an' Crawford's. If he's there, they'll locate him, all right." Jeff shook his big head. "Mrs. Kerrigan sure is feelin' terrible. She's scared to death!"

His words cast a hush over the crowd. Then, with a start, Sam heard the indolent voice of Slop Jeffers.

The scrawny man had taken refuge from the rain on the small porch of Jeff Larkin's store. He sat on its floor, his back propped against a post, his arms encircling his knees. Over a dozen men stood between Sam and Slop, and so neither of them had yet seen the other.

"High time the sheriff got wise to things," Slop remarked.

Jeff Larkin, turning to him, slowly demanded, "Meanin' just what, Slop?"

"Who'd I find around the carcass o' Cal Gordon? Hey? Why, Sam Squam o' the sheep ranch. Who'd Foster find over the carcass o' Skinny Jim Bale? Why, Mrs. Lenroot o' the sheep ranch. Seems to me them sheep folks is mixed up in this mess too doggone often for it to be just accident!"

THOSE who were aware of Sam's presence glanced at him in alarm. They saw his face become rocky with indignation and his eyes flare. He started pushing his way through the crowd, using his good arm as a wedge.

Men fell out of his way instinctively. A moment later Slop Jeffers was so astonished that he sat upright with a jerk of his whole bony body.

Sam glared at him. "If you got any accusations to make, hombre," he said, "let's hear 'em now!"

Jeffers' surprised gaze slid down swiftly to Sam's waist. There was no weapon buckled about it. The six-gun had been left in the bedroom. Reassured, the lean man looked at Sam with contempt.

"Thought *you* was laid up in bed."

"I'm askin' you to back up the charge you just made!"

"Charge?" Jeffers said innocently. "What d'you mean, charge?"

"If you're hintin' that Mrs. Lenroot or I—"

"Hang onto yourself, hombre, hang on," Jeffers drawled. Again he settled back against the porch

post, hugging his knees. "You ain't in no condition to start arguments you can't finish. I wasn't makin' any charges. I was just commenting on something everybody savvies. When there's trouble, one o' you sheep folks is always on hand. You ain't denyin' it, are you?"

"I'm denying we *started* any o' this trouble!"

Jeffers merely smiled at that. But the smile was full of disdain. "Wouldn't hardly expect you to say anythin' else."

"Slop," Sam said with suppressed fury, "get up on your hind legs an' I'll smack them insinuations down your throat."

"What's wrong about 'em?" Slop inquired. Perhaps he knew Sam was in no physical condition to oppose him. Perhaps the memory of having been tied to a tree near Cal Gordon's body, of suffering the humiliation of being turned over to the sheriff that way, still rankled in him. "I sure wouldn't expect you to admit it, if you'd had anything to do with them killings. Neither would I expect you to admit Mrs. Lenroot was tied up to 'em. Shucks, not her, of all people—her who's sittin' up there in your bedroom this minute."

He made it sound ugly, insulting.

Sam forgot his shoulder. He sprang at Slop Jeffers, and his right fist launched a whizzing blow at the man's head.

But Jeff Larkin seized his arm. Hippy Kane leaped in between Sam and Slop. His hands pressed against Sam's chest, pushing him back. Others pressed forward to intercede, too.

"You can't fight like this!" Hippy rasped. "Quit it, Sam! Calm down! You're wounded!"

"I'll—"

They wouldn't let Sam finish his outraged cry. They were pulling him away from Jeffers, forcing him back. Everybody was talking in a confused chorus: "Remember that shoulder! . . . What d'you expect Slop to do? Hit back at a one-armed feller? . . . Hang onto yourself, Sam!"

In the end they overwhelmed him. Pale, enraged, breathing heavily, he found himself shoved outside the circle. A score of men milled between him and Jeffers. His shoulder ached excruciatingly where it had suffered several bumps.

As his breath returned, so did his sanity. Though his eyes still blazed, he could talk calmly again. He glared over the heads of the throng at Slop Jeffers.

"One o' these days," he called, "I'll have *both* arms workin' again! When I do, I'll remind you o' what you said today! I aim to pound my answer into your hide!"

"You ain't scarin' me none, sheep tender!" Jeffers answered loudly. "I'll be on hand!"

WHEN Sam returned to his room above the saloon, he was in a violent mood. His nerves twanged. His brows were contracted in a scowl. And the pain in his shoulder, though it began to subside, still stabbed acutely.

To steady himself, he rolled a cigarette. He sat on the small table, one leg swinging, and glowered out into the drizzle, wondering how many men in Mesquite Flats would allow their suspicions to become poisoned by Slop Jeffers' words.

That was the way Katherine Lenroot found him half an hour later—seated on the table's edge and glowering out of the window.

She entered unhurriedly, as always, poised and serene. If her interview with Gail Duke had been

an ordeal, her manner gave little evidence of it. She looked concerned when she saw that his hair and clothes were damp, his boots muddy.

"You've been outside!" she protested.

He rose and spoke choppily. "It's nothing. I'm all right. Just moseyed out to see what the excitement was about. Hoke Kerrigan can't be located."

"Good heavens!" She spoke in an appalled whisper. "I . . . I hope it doesn't mean he—"

"No use guessin'. Plenty hombres are out huntin' the answer." He waved to the chair, and when Katherine Lenroot had sunk into it, he settled again on the edge of the table. "Look, Mrs. Lenroot. I don't hanker to pry into anything which ain't my business. But—"

"I know. You want me to tell you about this girl—about Gail Duke."

"Yes, ma'am, I sure do. It threw me like a hamstrung calf when you two spotted each other."

Mrs. Lenroot frowned at her boots. Mechanically a hand thrust back whisps of dark hair. At last, reaching a decision, she looked up at him and spoke frankly.

"Sam, this is for your ears alone. I'm not telling even the sheriff—yet. There's no use bringing that girl needless trouble. I wouldn't be telling you, either, if you didn't know she and I recognized each other. I . . . I warned her I'd have to tell you."

"You sure make it sound mysterious!"

"I'm sorry. I'm asking for your word that this won't go any further, Sam, until I say so."

"All right. You've got it."

The woman hesitated. Then she said abruptly, "Gail Duke's name—her real name—is Ruth Lenroot. She's my husband's daughter!"

CHAPTER XIII

SPLIT FAMILY

AT first Sam was too stunned to utter a sound. He felt a pang he could not clearly identify. The sensation deepened, spread, until it became an ache; and the ache clutched at him and would not let go. With it he experienced a dull sense of growing horror.

"Gosh," he managed at last, a little huskily. "Gosh, Mrs. Lenroot! For a daughter o' Nevada Bill Lenroot to be around at a time like this when somebody's killin' in his name

Continued on page 110

"I TALKED WITH GOD"

(yes, I did—actually and literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

You too may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 8, Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use is here for your use too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 8, Moscow, Idaho. Advt. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.

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DICK KORDA and his famous Wakefield Winner.

Continued from page 107

to square accounts for him! What's she claimin' to be doin' in Mesquite Flats, anyhow?"

"I . . . I don't know, Sam. I have an idea she's here to try to stop these murders."

"But she came before they started! You mean she knew they was goin' to happen?"

"It looks that way, Sam." Katherine Lenroot tried to keep her worry out of her voice, but her tones shook. "It certainly looks that way!"

"What did she *say* she came for? You must've asked her!"

"I did. Of course. She says—Oh, Sam, you've got to know the rest of it to understand! She wasn't my husband's only child. He had a son, too—David!"

"Well, I'll be—"

"They're both children by his first wife. David's the older."

Sam had to swallow hard to crush the amazement that stormed in him. "By thunder," he gasped, "in . . . in all the years I herded sheep for your husband, I never once heard him mention any children! An' now it turns out he's got two."

"He never spoke about them to anybody, Sam."

"What in tarnation did he want to keep a thing like that secret for?"

"The reasons don't matter much now."

"Mrs. Lenroot, everythin' matters now! We got to clear out all these riddles! Men are bein' murdered!"

This she considered with frowning unease.

"Tell me about it," Sam urged, desperately. "There's some things I just got to get straight! My head feels like a band o' wild mustangs is thunderin' through it!"

She studied him searchingly before a faint, bitter smile quivered on her lips. "You're a stubborn man, Sam."

"Only when I got to be!"

"Well, then," she said reluctantly. "I'll start with Ruth. When I married my husband, she was sixteen. We tried to get along, Ruth and I. But sometimes such things turn out to be pretty hard."

She paused as though to seek an adequate explanation for this. In the end she continued with the simple facts.

"At sixteen, Ruth was a grown woman. Used to managing her father's Colorado home. When I stepped in, there were two bosses. And two bosses in a home were bound to clash. Ruth and I just couldn't make a go of it. For months we tried, but it was no use. Bill, my husband, thought Ruth was being obstinate and perverse. He sided with me. Believe me, Sam, I did my best to prevent that. I didn't want it that way. I wanted to make my peace with Ruth. But Bill kept right on defending me. Finally, Ruth couldn't stand it any more. She packed up and left. Went to live with an aunt in Denver."

MRS. LENROOT gazed out of the window as if in the drizzle she could see her memories.

"Pretty soon she was taking care of herself, giving piano lessons. About that time we sold the Colorado ranch and came down here. Since then I haven't seen Ruth—until today." She frowned down into her lap. "I know she'd have come after her father's death if there had been time before the funeral. But there wasn't."

"And her brother?" Sam demanded. "Where's he?"

"I don't know."

"Doesn't Ruth know?"

"No, Sam. She says she doesn't. David was always a strange, hot-headed youngster. I, myself, never met him."

"How's that?"

"He got tired of working on his father's Colorado ranch. Also, he got into a few fights that made him pretty unpopular up there. So when he was eighteen—two years before I married Bill—Dave left home. Went wandering. We never were sure what became of him. Once or twice a year Bill would get a letter, always from some unexpected part of the West. But Dave never came to see us. And he was angry after Ruth left us. He seemed to think we'd driven her out. For the last couple of years we didn't hear from him at all."

"Did Ruth?"

"About once a year."

Sam stepped close to Mrs. Lenroot. He squinted down into her eyes, and his voice became very low.

"Let's see if I'm guessin' right," he said. "Ruth figures it's her brother, Dave, who's killin' off these hombres. That's why she's here—maybe tryin' to stop him. Is that right?"

A wild light flared in Katherine Lenroot's eyes as she looked up at Sam. It was like a hint of panic. Her fingers suddenly reached out to grasp his wrist.

"Sam, don't spread that notion! Please! It may not be so, and it'll only cause a lot of trouble! Ingersol may arrest Ruth, hold her on suspicion."

"But that's why she's here, ain't

it?" he pressed. "To see her brother?"

"Y-yes!"

"*Has* she seen him?"

"No! She says she hasn't!"

Sam raised his head and peered thinly at the wall. "I wonder," he muttered, "if under the circumstances, she'd admit havin' seen Dave, even if she had. If he's doin' the killin', he'd be here under some other name, too, I reckon. An' only Ruth could point him out. Still an' all, chances are to point out her brother now would mean to get him hanged, pronto. An' we . . . we couldn't expect her to do *that*."

His words left an uncomfortable stillness in the room. The scrape of Mrs. Lenroot's boot as she moved a foot seemed inordinately loud.

THEY looked at each other, and their troubled eyes said many unutterable things. Sam hated himself for voicing suspicions against the girl in the room down the hall. Yet what choice had he, if he wanted to be honest with himself, if he wanted to see facts as they were?

It was during the hush that he heard the sloshing of horses' hoofs in the street. Many of them. So many, in truth, that he stepped to the window to investigate.

Through the gray drizzle he saw a score of men dismounting in the mud in front of Sheriff Ingersol's and their horses appeared to have been wallowing in bogs. Ingersol, himself, was there, his erect, white-haired figure towering above the others. And over Ingersol's saddle dangled the body of a big, red-haired man!

"Kerrigan!" Sam said tensely. "They . . . they found Kerrigan!"

Instantly Mrs. Lenroot came to his side. Her white face was horrified. Yet she said nothing at all. There was no longer any surprise in finding these murdered bodies. Only a growing terror.

"I'm goin' down!" Sam said determinedly.

Katherine Lenroot didn't join him. Pallid, she stood leaning on the window sill as though she'd been mesmerized in that position. She remained that way until Sam's steps no longer sounded on the stairs; until she saw him splashing across the muddy street toward the sheriff's office. Only then did she straighten.

Now an abnormal brightness burned in Mrs. Lenroot's eyes. She turned stiffly, like an automaton. She went determinedly along the hall to Ruth Lenroot's closed door. She didn't knock. She twisted the knob softly, went in.

Ruth lay on the bed, her face buried in the pillow. She had been sobbing when Mrs. Lenroot left her, but now she was quiet.

"Ruth!"

The girl jerked up her head, looked around wretchedly.

"There's been another one!" Mrs. Lenroot whispered. "That makes four. Four lives for the life of your father. When are you going to stop it?"

"I don't know what to do!" Ruth cried desperately.

"Don't you?" It was a grim challenge. After a moment, Mrs. Lenrott closed the door behind herself and slowly shook her head. "You're not fooling me, Ruth. I think you *can* stop it! I think you've *seen* Dave! If . . . if you don't do something about it, I'll have to talk to the sheriff!"

YES, they had found Hoke Kerrigan's body, all right—with a noose around its neck, a slip of paper saying, "Remember Lenroot?"

and a slug in the brain.

They had found it half sunk in the mud of a gully on Rance Crawford's range. It sprawled almost a mile from the cabin in which Skinny Jim Bale had lain dead. And not far from it, huddling under a few cottonwoods, had been both horses.

Sam Squam stared at the dangling, red-haired body. He was so intent on it that he hardly realized Sheriff Ingersol was approaching him. The sheriff looked tired today. His face was lined, and there were pouches under his eyes.

"Sam," he asked, "where's Demijohn Walker?"

Sam looked at him. "Demijohn? Why?"

"I'm askin' where he is."

"He rode to Sunbeam this mornin'."

"Sunbeam, eh?"

Alarm rushed into Sam's voice, for there was no mistaking Ingersol's doubts. "What's the matter, sheriff?" he demanded. "What's wrong with Demijohn?"

"I hanker to palaver with him, that's all. Tim Slater, one o' Crawford's rannies ridin' range this mornin', saw Demijohn lopin' along with Kerrigan an' Skinny Jim. They all disappeared together over a ridge. 'Bout fifteen minutes later, Tim thought he heard a couple shots 'way off, the way the three of 'em had gone."

To suspect Demijohn of all people, and on such uncertain evidence, seemed absurd to Sam. It left him outraged.

"Why, sheriff," he cried, "Demijohn was ridin' to our sheep ranch on his way to Sunbeam! He prob'ly crossed Crawford's spread. If he met up with Kerrigan an' Jim by accident, it was plumb natural for 'em to ride together a ways. As for the shots, shucks, they prob'ly happened long after Demijohn left the others!"

"All the same, I'd like a powwow with that side kick o' yours. When's he due back from Sunbeam?"

"Tomorrow."

"Comin' here or to the ranch?"

"Can't say. The ranch, I reckon."

Ingersol nodded. "I'll be up." And the way he said it implied a threat.

There were ways in which Sam could have diverted Ingersol's suspicions from Demijohn. He might, for example, have spoken of Ruth Lenroot. But he didn't. Scowling, he watched while Kerrigan's heavy body was carried into the sheriff's office. Then, with head lowered, he crossed the muddy road toward the saloon. And his thoughts, despite the disconcerting matter of Demijohn, went back to the girl he had known as Gail Duke. Or more accurately, they went to her brother, Dave.

So he didn't see Slop Jeffers. Passing the saloon's swinging doors on his way to the side entrance, he didn't bother to glance up from the mud.

Jeffers, leaning on the bar, stood beside one of the Bar V Bar riders who had come into town with him. "Come next Tuesday," he drawled ominously, "those sheep folk are sure due for a surprise. We'll have our herd across their spread 'fore they know what's struck 'em!"

CHAPTER XIV

RANGE DETECTIVE

SAM found Katherine Lenroot on the threshold of her own room above the saloon. Apparently, she had been about to close the door when she heard him come up the stairs. The sounds he made kept her still, waiting.

She was tense, he saw. Her grip on the doorknob was visibly hard.

"Well," he said grimly, "looks like the killer got away with this one, too. Ain't nothin' to show who dry-gulched Hoke Kerrigan."

"Did . . . did they find any marks around his body?"

"Nope. Reckon the rain washed 'em away pretty fast. We—" He faltered, frowning at the floor. "Mrs. Lenroot," he muttered presently, "looks like I got to turn range detective an' help clear this mess."

"You? Why you?"

"They're beginnin' to say some mighty ornery things about our outfit." He told her then about the suspicions Slop Jeffers was trying to implant in men's minds. "Best way to stop folks from talkin' is to show we mean business in clearin' up this thing!"

"But, Sam, what can you possibly do?"

"Don't know yet. Figure to start, though, by havin' a heart-to-heart talk with Miss . . . with Ruth. She in her room?"

Katherine Lenroot sent a glance down the hall. "I've just talked to her myself. Maybe you'll have better luck than I did, but I doubt it. She says there's nothing she can do."

"Well," grunted Sam, "leastways, I can try. I sure hanker to ask her a couple things."

Mrs. Lenroot watched in silence while he knocked at Ruth's door; while the door opened. Then, without a sound, she stepped back into her room and shut her own door.

"Mind if I come in for a bit o' palaver?" Sam asked.

The girl stared at him with wide, frightened eyes that showed the ravages of tears.

"What . . . what is it?" she asked fearfully.

"Mrs. Lenroot's told me quite a few things. I'd like to get them sort o' cleared up. Mind?"

She stood uncertain for a long time. But suddenly she stepped back and waved him jerkily into the room. When he entered, she closed the door and leaned back against it to face him.

"Well?"

"Look, Miss Ruth. No use bein' scared. I—"

"You mustn't call me Ruth!" she broke in tensely. For an instant, spots of color conquered her pallor. "Please, Sam! I . . . I'm still Gail Duke!"

"Outside," he promised with a nod, "you'll still be Miss Duke, if you want it that way. Though I sure don't savvy what it's all about."

She tore her gaze away from him and frowned at the window.

"Mrs. Lenroot told me quite a lot," he went on. "But she doesn't savvy some things herself. About your brother, for instance."

He could see Ruth stiffen. She walked to the window, gazing out blindly into the drizzle.

"Sooner or later it's got to be cleared up, Miss Ruth. You ought to see that. It ain't that I hanker to hurt you any. Gosh, if this whole thing could be avoided, I'd be the happiest—"

"All right, Sam. I understand." She spoke composedly now. "Tell me what you want me to clear up."

"First off, what's become o' Dave?"

"I don't know."

"You ain't seen him around Mesquite Flats?"

"I haven't seen him in two years!"

Sam pressed on more cautiously now: "But you knew Dave was aimin' to start murderin' folks around here. You must've known it, since that's why you came—to stop him."

SHE swung around, her face ghastly. An instinctive denial seemed to hover on her lips, but when she met Sam's eyes, the words died. They were unexpectedly gentle eyes. Eyes full of importunity and hope. The eyes of a man who wanted to believe in her, who pleaded only for honesty. And because there was something about Sam Squam that made her tremble at times, she lowered her head and found she couldn't lie to him then.

"Anything you tell me," he said soberly, coming close to her, "won't go past me. I give you my word for that, Ruth. Did you know—or suspect, maybe—that Dave wanted to square things with the hombres who lynched your father?"

It seemed to Sam that he waited hours before she finally replied. And because she appeared to be suffering an anguish of indecision, he, somehow, suffered with her while he waited. His good arm reached out and he put a reassuring hand over hers.

"You know Dave figured to do it, didn't you?"

"No." It was a helpless whisper. "I was just . . . afraid he might."

"He told you that?"

"He wrote me."

"Where is he now?"

"I don't know, Sam!" Her white face was lifted, and her eyes shone desperately. "I tell you, I don't know!"

"Where'd he write you from?"

"Phoenix."

"How long ago?"

"About two weeks."

"Said he aimed to kill?"

"Oh, no! No, Sam! He wrote that he'd found a way of learning who'd lynched father and he intended to make the lynchers pay for it! Only, there was something queer in the letter, a kind of secrecy that scared me. I didn't know what he'd do! That's why I came—to talk to him before he did something crazy! Then the . . . the murders started, and I was terrified! Sam, I'm not sure Dave's doing it! It may be somebody else! That's why I can't talk to the sheriff or—"

Suddenly she slumped down to a chair and covered her face with her hands.

"The whole thing is so crazy . . . all these killings . . . maybe with Dave mixed up in them!" she sobbed. "And because I had to have some reason for being here, looking for him, I pretended to be a piano teacher. But, Sam, honest, I—"

"You still got the letter Dave sent you from Phoenix?"

"No. I . . . I tore it up."

"Did he mention how he'd found out who lynched your pa?"

"No. He just said he could find out. He had a way."

"Didn't even hint how?"

"No, Sam."

"Well, seems to me maybe we ought to—"

Two sharp knocks at the door stopped him. Ruth jerked up her head in alarm, looked over his shoulder. "Who is it?" she called.

A deep voice answered, "Len Foster, Miss Duke. Could I see you?"

She sent a bewildered glance at Sam, then hurried to open the door. Len Foster, sombrero in hand, nodded to her and to Sam. He didn't attempt to enter.

"Miss Duke," he said gravely, "an hour back a Mexican tried to cross the Border. Our boys saw him and started after him. Reckon his business couldn't've been legal, 'cause he turned and tried to hightail away like he was hellbent for South America. What's more, he made the mistake o' sendin' a slug back at

our boys. Naturally, one o' them shot back an' nicked the feller in the side. We got him in a shack near the Border." He paused. "He's too weak to be toted into town, Miss Duke. Do you figure you could ride out with us an' maybe identify him? I got a horse saddled for you. If he's the hombre you spotted on Cal Gordon's trail, we'd sure appreciate knowin' it."

Ruth was speechless. She glanced from Foster to Sam. Perhaps she was half fearing Sam would betray her to the Border Patrolman. But Sam said quietly:

"Reckon you better go, Miss Duke."

"Y-yes!" she stammered in a strangely high-pitched whisper. Mechanically, she reached for her hat. "Yes, I guess I'd better!"

"Do you think you'd recognize the Mex if you saw him, Miss Duke?" Foster asked.

"I . . . I'll try!"

Sam could have stopped them with a word to Foster. But he didn't. He knew he'd never be able to betray Ruth Lenroot. He stood there silently, while she accompanied Foster down the stairs.

AN hour later Zeke Hodgett, who owned the livery stable, pulled a pipe from his mouth and gaped at the bandaged man who entered his office.

"You don't mean to say you want your hoss saddled *now*, Sam!"

"Sure do. Make it pronto, will you, Zeke?"

Hodgett blinked out of the window. Dusk had come early with the drizzle; already dim lights were shining from stores to splash over the mud.

"If you're calc'latin' to head back for your sheep ranch," Zeke objected, "I'd sure advise you to hang around till mornin'. This ain't no night for ridin'—not for anybody with a shoulder like yourn. 'Course, it ain't none o' my business, but—"

"I ain't aimin' to ride home," Sam cut in patiently. "Just saddle my palomino, will you?"

With a sigh, Zeke rose to comply. He still disapproved of seeing a wounded man ride in this weather. A few minutes later Sam Squam loped out of Mesquite Flats, holding leather with his one able hand. The palomino's hoofs splashed up fountains of mud, and the drizzle made Sam squint. But it couldn't hide the determination on his features. Every few moments he frowned back over his shoulder. He had no desire to be followed by a murderer this time. For he was riding again to the Dawson ranch to talk to the blind man, Hopi Painter, whom the storm had apparently kept from coming to the saloon today.

Bald Gene Dawson, who met Sam as he dismounted near the porch, told him in perplexity, "Yeah, Sam, Hopi's inside. Gosh, when are you hombres goin' to let him be? Ingersol an' Foster was here to question him. An' now you!"

"Reckon," Sam replied, nodding to his shoulder, "I got more reason to ask questions than any of 'em, Dawson. Mind if I mosey in?"

"No. Go right ahead. Me, I got to go over to the barn. You'll find Hopi in the parlor, listenin' to that doggone gramophone o' his."

Hopi had always liked music. Before blindness struck him eight months ago, he had been Mesquite Flats' favorite piano player. These days he turned to music more eagerly than ever, for with the loss of his sight, he had to rely on his ears for whatever pleasures life could bring him.

He lay on a black leather couch

in the parlor, hands clasped under his head. His eyes, wide and staring, were fixed on the ceiling. The old gramophone beside him, somewhat scratchy at best, was playing the Blue Danube Waltz.

FOR several minutes Sam paused on the threshold of the lamplit room, watching the man. Finally he went forward, stepping in the muffling thickness of bear rugs. He tossed his sombrero to a chair and stopped beside the couch.

"Hopi."

His voice jerked the blind man into half rising. Propped on an elbow, he groped out with one hand.

"Who . . . who is it?"

"Sam Squam."

The name seemed to stiffen Hopi. Then, with a sudden outthrust of his arm, he found the gramophone's switch. He turned it off, and after some scraping the room was hushed.

"Wh-what you want, Sam?"

"You heard what happened to me, didn't you?"

"About your shoulder? Sure! Ingersol told me. I . . . I'm right sorry!"

"Listen, Hopi." Sam sat down on the couch at the blind man's feet. "You just lay back easy an' we'll palaver."

"If you want to know who shot you," Hopi cried, on a shrill note of rising panic, "it's no use askin' *me!* I told the sheriff that! I told Foster, too! I don't know anythin' about it!"

"Calm down, Hopi, calm down. Ain't nothin' to get peeved about."

"All you hombres askin' the same

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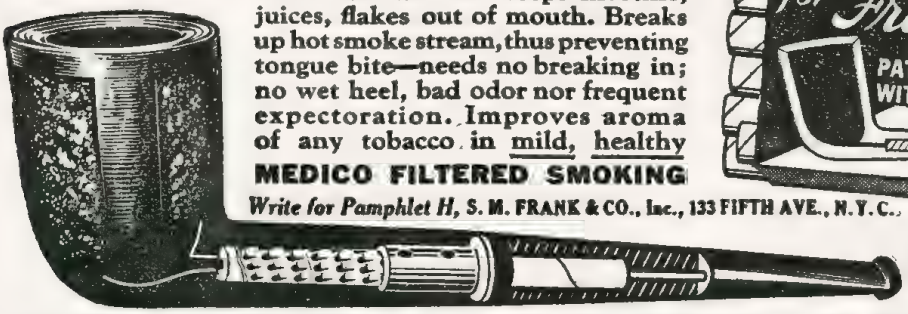

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thing! Like maybe I plugged you, myself! I tell, you I don't *know!*"

"Well, even if you don't," Sam tried to sound conciliatory, "we can sort o' think it over together, can't we?"

"What d'you mean, think it over?"

"You add what you know to what I know, an' maybe we'll get two an' two, so it'll add up to four."

Hopi swung his legs around until he was seated. In the yellow lamplight his face was still frightened, though now it held a touch of suspicion, too. His hand groped until it found the edge of the table. There it clung.

"What you gettin' at?" he asked guardedly. "What is it *you* know?"

"All I know is that somebody got scared after he saw you an' me ridin' alone that night—so scared he tried to bushwhack me. As I see it, perhaps he figured you'd told me somethin' I oughtn't to know."

"That's loco!" Hopi flung out the denial angrily. "What could *I* tell you?"

"Well, now, let's see. Maybe you could've set me thinkin', like, by askin', 'Got the fifty?' "

He watched Hopi intently as he spoke. And he could detect an inward jolt in the man. The hand tightened its grip on the table.

Presently Hopi whispered, "I already explained that, didn't I? It . . . it was a bet with Bubblehead that—"

"That bet was paid off months ago, Hopi. You wouldn't be askin' for it again. Besides, Bubblehead says he never took you home, so you couldn't figure you was ridin' with him that particular night."

"I was drunk!" Hopi said harshly. "I couldn't figure anythin'! I was just talkin'!"

"No, Hopi, you wasn't *that* drunk."

"Listen, Sam—"

"I'm askin' for the truth, that's all. I want to know two things: First, who you thought you was ridin' with that night. Second, what you really meant by askin' for the fifty."

"Why, I—"

Hopi Painter got no further. Outside there was the crack of a shot. It shattered the window.

A red spot blossomed on Hopi's shirt and spread swiftly. The bullet had flung him back against the wall, and he lay there, writhing crazily, coughing, with blood beginning to bubble from his mouth. He tried to shriek, but he produced only more bubbles.

Sam, utterly stunned, sprang away from the couch on mad impulse. Dodging, reaching for his gun, he heard another shot. This second bullet found the lamp.

It crashed on the floor, and though there was an instant spread of flaming kerosene to challenge the darkness, it was a swaying, eerie light that left everything uncertain. Sam's heart pounded wildly as he flung himself behind a chair.

CHAPTER XV

WHAT THE BLIND MAN SAW

IN those first few seconds while he faced the window, six-gun in hand, Sam could hardly control his nerves. They quivered. They pounded. Holding his breath, he crouched behind the chair ready to blaze away at any head which might appear at the window.

But no head presented itself.

Outside, somewhere near the barn, he heard shouts. From the corners of his eyes he saw Hopi crumple down into a still huddle on the couch. And on the floor the kerosene was spreading its carpet of flame.

Driving out an oath, Sam dropped the six-gun. He seized one of the bear rugs and flung it over the flames. As it fell, it choked some of the fire. But the kerosene was running farther. Sam raced across the room for the other rug and dragged it back.

Just then Gene Dawson lurched into the door. Terrified, eyes round, the bald rancher saw the fire, saw Hopi Painter, saw the blood on Hopi's chest, all in one wild glance. He seemed too dazed to speak.

"Water!" yelled Sam. He was pulling the bearskins to the spots where they would do the most good, but the fur, itself, had already begun to burn. "Get water buckets!"

Spinning back to the door, Dawson cried hoarsely, "Who did it?"

"Couldn't see!"

Dawson was out of the room now, racing for water. But his voice came back on a hysterical pitch: "My boys are comin' out o' the bunkhouse! They'll catch the buzzard!"

Out in the wet night Dawson's cowpunchers, too, were shoutin. Then came shots, half a dozen of them. Sam, fighting the flames, thought passionately, "Maybe they plugged the killer!"

He couldn't get to Hopi now. The first thing to do was to squelch this blaze, before it razed the house. As he stamped on the rugs, dragging them here and there over leaping fire, his eyes darted again and again to the still figure on the couch. Dead? He didn't know. He couldn't leave the flames even long enough to find out.

Dawson returned with buckets of water, and two men followed him, each bringing more buckets. They had run so fast that half the water had sloshed out on the floors before they could pour it over the burning kerosene.

It took fully ten minutes to kill the flames. By that time some of the chairs were scorched, the floor was ruined, and two burning curtains had to be pulled from windows. Sam wanted to ride after the killer himself; but what if Hopi was still alive and could talk? He had to consider that possibility. At last, the fire was out, and he could rush to the blind man.

He found Hopi still breathing. True, the man's breathing was fitful and weak, and the blood that soaked his shirt seemed to be draining his life away swiftly. With Dawson's shaking help, Sam stretched Hopi on his back. He ripped the wet shirt open—and revealed a hideous wound in the chest.

Gene Dawson, his face ghastly, turned to one of his cowpunchers. "Ride for Doc Benner!" he ordered. "Don't waste time saddlin'—just *ride!*"

The man didn't wait even to reply.

A moment later two other cowpunchers, their clothes spattered with mud, came into the house. They clutched six-guns, and their faces were drawn.

"The polecat got away!" one of them gasped.

"Who was it?" cried Dawson. "Did you *see* him?"

"We couldn't see him close enough! Just had a look-see at him ridin' hell-bent the other side o' the barn! He . . . he was streakin' for the hills!"

"Didn't you recognize him?"

"In the dark? Course not! But Slim an' Lefty an' Bill are chasin' the devil! They grabbed hosses an' rode after him bare back! Maybe they'll get him yet!"

FAR off in the night guns cracked, perhaps half a mile away. It was a hopeful sign. It meant the three riders were still in sight of the killer, still chasing him. Sam Squam swallowed hard as he bent over the blind man.

With quivering fingers, Dawson was lighting another lamp. When it glowed, he looked haggardly over the havoc in his parlor.

"Hopi!" Sam spoke urgently.

Only a groan answered him.

Dawson pushed Sam aside. "Let me try him!"

"He ought to know who it was!" whispered Sam.

"Didn't you spot anybody at the window?" Dawson asked.

"No. My back was turned that way!"

Gene Dawson, still bent over the unconscious man, turned a queer glance to Sam. "Mebbe that slug was meant for *you!*"

"It's possible. But it was Hopi who got the slug. That's what counts."

They had to work over the man for fifteen minutes. They washed the wound, forced whiskey into the colorless lips, spoke his name over and over again.

Then, suddenly, Hopi Painter moaned.

He had writhed a little, and Dawson leaned far over him. The bald man said eagerly, "Hopi, d'you hear me? Can you hear me, boy?"

A single sibilant word escaped the wounded man's lips. It sounded like "Sam." And Sam at once knelt on the floor. He put an ear close to Hopi's mouth, waving Dawson to silence. The other cowpunchers in the room watched in awe.

"Yes, Hopi," Sam urged. "I'm here."

There was no immediate reply. A spasm of pain contorted Hopi Painter's countenance. It lifted his body, too, arching it. Only when he settled back did he attempt to speak again. And what he said, amazingly, was: *"Lenroot."*

Sam's heart pounded furiously. "Yes?" he said. "What about Lenroot?"

Again the answer was delayed so long that Sam thought, in desperation, it would never come.

"No use holdin' back, Hopi!" he pleaded. "If you're tryin' to cover somebody, he don't deserve it! He just tried to kill you to shut your lips. A buzzard like that don't deserve bein' protected, Hopi! Come on! You can save a lot o' lives! Tell us what you know! Who's doin' the killin'? *Who?*"

Perhaps the half-conscious man on the couch couldn't hear the imprecations. For when he did murmur again, it was no direct reply to Sam's urgings.

"Lenroot—" He mumbled sounds in a choked whisper. "I—saw him —lynched. Saw who—did it—"

Then a terrible spasm of pain caught him. It wrenched a cry from the depths of his being. It flung him over on his side, and his knees rose almost to his chest. His hands, with fingers clawing, tore at the wall, and suddenly he collapsed. He sank limp and still and sprawling.

DAWSON shot a frightened glance at Sam and bent his bald head to press an ear against Hopi's heart. And as he listened his eyes widened. When at last he straightened, it was to stammer:

"He . . . he's dead!"

Into Sam Squam rushed a sense of desperate frustration. If only Hopi had lived a little longer—long enough to tell more of what he had been struggling to say!

Presently one of the cowpunchers muttered savagely, "To plug a blind hombre—that's what I call a brave man's way o' fightin'! Man, if we ever get our hands on that scorpion!"

The sloshing of horses' hoofs interrupted him.

Sam all but flung himself to the bullet-shattered window. In the darkness he could see three figures swinging off horses that had no saddles.

"Get him?" he called.

"No!" a voice shouted back in angry disgust.

"Did you get a look at him?"

"Never got closer than two, three hundred yards! Couldn't make him out in the dark—nor his horse, either!"

Another voice added, "We pumped plenty lead at him, though. Nicked him, mebbe. But he streaked for the foothills and got away in that damn criss-cross o' gullies an' canyons!"

Dawson was at the window now, too. "There ought to be plenty tracks in this mud!" he said harshly.

"That hombre was headin' for the river," one of the cowpunchers retorted. "He's smart enough to lose his tracks in water. Why don't you look for the marks he left under that there window? Bring out the lamp!"

Sam had thought of that, too.

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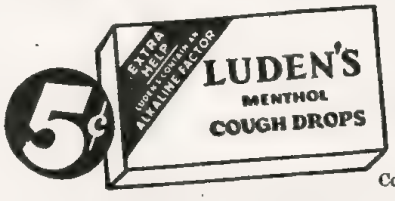

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Even as the ranny spoke, he was hurrying across the room for the lamp. He grasped it and led the others outside. They approached the region of the shattered window carefully, to avoid marring any spoor that might be there.

They found a spoor, all right.

But it was a bunching of huge, shapeless, beastlike tracks—the same sort of blurred tracks that had once puzzled Demijohn Walker and Sam near a badlands cave!

CHAPTER XVI

FAREWELL TO TOWN

THAT night the news of Hopi Painter's death preceded Sam to Mesquite Flats. It came with the return of Doc Benner, grim and scowling, who reported curtly to all who questioned him along the street. Sheriff Ingersol, he said, had already gone out to the Dawson ranch, but there was nothing to indicate who had murdered Hopi.

By the time Sam, himself, reached town just before midnight—in the company of Sheriff Ingersol and several others—Mesquite Flats was abnormally silent. Tense, too. Even the saloon poured no noise into the street. For the insane succession of killings had crushed the town's spirit and left it in a frightened mood.

Favoring his bandaged shoulder as much as he could, Sam left his palomino at Zeke Hodgett's stable. While he crossed the road toward the saloon, a dozen men silently nodded to him. He looked worn, they saw. His face held deep grooves, and there were tired lines under his bloodshot eyes. Because the details of the shooting had already been spread—and because Sheriff Ingersol himself, was repeating them now to a group in the saloon's door, nobody troubled Sam with questions. For that he felt grateful.

He needed a drink; needed it badly. When he pushed his way

into the saloon, Bubblehead Cray did not even wait for an order. Gravely he pushed a glass and a bottle of whiskey across the bar.

Sam filled the glass and gulped down the liquor, then took a second drink. It brought a hot glow into his being and helped steady his nerves. For a moment he stood still, listening to the sheriff. It was obvious that the people of Mesquite Flats had had enough of murder. Their mood was sullen and resentful, as if they were putting silent pressure on Sheriff Ingersol.

With a nod to Bubblehead, Sam put a coin on the bar and went out the side door. At the top of the stairs, where only a dim light revealed her, Katherine Lenroot stood waiting for him.

"I was watching from the window," she said quietly. "I saw you ride into town."

He stopped on the steps below her, his hand on the banister. "Reckon you know what's happened."

"Yes. Sam, how's that shoulder?"

"All right." His glance drifted past Katherine Lenroot to the closed door of Ruth's room.

"Tomorrow morning you and I ride back to the ranch!" Mrs. Lenroot said determinedly.

His eyes questioned her curiously.

"You've been riding with death long enough!" she declared.

"Riding with death?"

He saw a touch of color rise in Mrs. Lenroot's pale face. "That was the way Dr. Benner put it," she said. "There . . . there seem to be shootings wherever you go! And you have no charmed life, Sam. Sooner or later, one of those bullets will get you if you stay here."

He smiled mirthlessly as he continued to the top of the stairs. "So you want to get me out to the ranch, where it's peaceful. Is that it?"

"Where it's safe, yes!"

"Just when I'm beginnin' to dig into this crazy mystery—"

"Doc Benner," she interrupted, "says that if your wound opens and starts bleeding again, he won't be responsible for your condition. It'll weaken you terribly, Sam. I . . . I want to get you away until you're well!"

He looked down at the bandaged shoulder. His wry expression persisted. But when he raised his eyes, it was to nod.

"All right," he agreed. "We'll go back. I'd sort o' like to get into that quiet valley for a spell, anyhow—just to be able to look up into the skies an' do some clear thinkin'. Hopi's given me plenty to think about, Mrs. Lenroot."

HE didn't explain there on the landing, though she looked at him searchingly. Instead, he led her into his room, lit the lamp, and shut the door. Facing her, Sam pushed sprawling hair back from his eyes.

"Hopi," he said softly, "saw your husband lynched."

Katherine Lenroot seized the back of a chair. She stared incredulously.

"That's all he had time to tell us 'fore he died. He saw the lynchin'. That happened a few months 'fore he lost his sight, you remember."

"Yes, I remember."

"So I been thinkin'. Seems like Hopi had plenty money lately. Enough to drink all he liked in the saloon. Yet he wasn't earnin' a cent. Even Gene Dawson swears he don't know where Hopi got the money. We found forty-two dollars in his pocket tonight. An' twenty more in his room."

"What are you driving at, Sam?" she whispered tensely.

"Hopi had plenty money. Where did he get it? Could it be that he got *paid* for tellin' somebody who it was that lynched your husband?"

She was aghast.

"Why not?" he argued. "Maybe that's why he asked me for fifty that night, figurin' I was the hombre who was payin' for the information. It makes sense, Mrs. Lenroot."

"But, who—"

"Can't say who. That's what I want to think about for a spell. But it begins to explain things, don't it? Suppose the killer got scared the night I rode Hopi home. Suppose he thought maybe Hopi, not realizin' who he was ridin' with, had talked too much. In that case the killer might want to get rid o' me 'fore I could report to the sheriff. It would explain his tryin' to dry-gulch me."

Mrs. Lenroot nodded dazedly.

"Also," Sam continued, "if the killer knew I was tryin' to get information out o' Hopi tonight—if he thought maybe Hopi would say too much—it would explain his silencin' Hopi the way he did."

"But, Sam, the man would have had to be around every minute, watching you, knowing every step you took! There wasn't anybody like that, was there?"

"Not that I know of," he admitted.

"Then who—"

"But I might've been watched by eyes I never knew was around, Mrs. Lenroot, eyes I never thought to suspect, anyhow."

She held her breath fiercely, and her stare became very bright. "Have . . . have you somebody definite in mind?" she managed in a whisper.

HE shook his head slowly. "No. That's why I won't mind gettin' off by myself for a spell, up in our valley, just to think things out clear." He paused. After a strained hush, he nodded toward the door. "What happened with Ruth?"

That startled Mrs. Lenroot into a moment's bewilderment. "Ruth?"

"When she rode out with Foster to identify that Mex."

"Oh— Nothing, Sam. She couldn't identify him. She was back in an hour."

Sam thoughtfully nodded. With weariness in every gesture, he sank to the edge of his bed. Again he pushed disheveled hair back from his forehead.

"Reckon I could speak to Ruth now?" he asked slowly.

"She's asleep, Sam."

"Does she know what happened to Hopi Painter?"

"No. She came back to town just after you'd left. She was exhausted and I made her go to bed.

Sam gazed out of the window into darkness. After a long silence he sighed, rose, and began to unbuckle his gun belt. It was awkward with one hand. Katherine Lenroot stepped forward to help him.

"In the morning, Sam," she repeated resolutely, "you and I are going back where we belong! Where there's peace!"

"Peace," he amended, the words bitter, "until Soapy Dolan comes shovin' his cows onto our spread!"

"We won't worry about that till it happens."

"I . . . I sure hope Demijohn gets some rancher to come ahead o' Dolan." He hesitated as Mrs. Lenroot draped the gun belt over the back of a chair. "What about Ruth? What's she goin' to do now?"

"I asked her to ride home with us."

He couldn't suppress a note of eagerness: "Gosh, that's swell, Mrs. Lenroot! Better than havin' her stay here alone!"

"Only"—Katherine Lenroot added quietly—"she isn't coming. She said she wants to stay in Mesquite Flats!"

CHAPTER XVII

TUESDAY'S SHOCK

IT was good to be back in the mountain valley. It was good to have the sheep dogs barking about you and leaping at your saddle in an effort to lick your hand in welcome. It was good to feel the warmth of clear sunshine, to look up into skies whose blueness was emphasized by a few white clouds. Here, where sheep grazed, there was tranquility, the sort of tranquility Sam Squam hadn't known since the day he started down to Mesquite Flats.

Homely old Abe Stutz was alone on the place. He ran out of the barn to greet them anxiously, a man full of questions, his forehead creased with apprehension. But when they had satisfied Abe's curiosity, the place was serenely quiet again.

And then, in the afternoon, the barking of the dogs announced the return of Demijohn Walker.

From afar the little, bow-legged man waved his sombrero. The dogs raced eagerly to meet him, and Sam stepped away from the ranchhouse porch, where he had been smoking while he pondered. Something in Demijohn's jaunty manner, even at a distance, suggested good news.

Demijohn dismounted with a broad grin when he reached the corral. "How's the shoulder?" he sang out.

"Comin' along fine," Sam assured him. "You look like you're chockful o' success."

"I'm chockful o' cows!" Demijohn laughed. "Hi, Mrs. Lenroot!" She had just come out of the screen door, and the short man waved to her. "I got Jud Severance o' the Eagle out-

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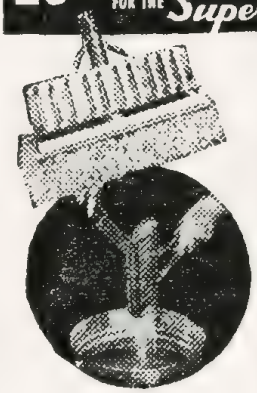

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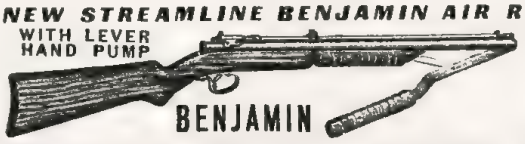

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fit comin' here with a hundred head o' Longhorns!"

"When?" cried Sam.

"First of October, like you said. Promised Sam we'd look after his men all winter. He figures to keep two or three here."

Sam looked at Katherine Lenroot, and the utter relief in her eyes, the actual delight, made him chuckle. The Eagle Ranch in Sunbeam, was a tremendous place, even larger than Soapy Dolan's Bar V Bar. With Jud Severance in the valley first, Sam felt confident, Soapy would never dare to launch an attack. He couldn't help grinning when he slapped Demijohn's dusty shoulder.

"Nice work, old-timer!" he commended. "You couldn't've got anybody better."

"I'm sure hankerin' to see Dolan's expression," Demijohn said, as he unsaddled his horse, "when he gets here with his herd an' finds the valley filled!" Then, glancing over his shoulder at Sam's face, he became more sober. "Anything new in Mesquite Flats?"

Instantly Sam's manner, too, changed. "Plenty," he said briefly. And the way he spoke caused Demijohn to straighten, forgetting the saddle. The small man looked in wonder from Sam to Mrs. Lenroot and back again.

"I don't like the smell o' that word," he muttered. "What's up now?"

SAM told him of the new murders —the killings of Skinny Jim Bale, of Hoke Kerrigan, of Hopi Painter. By the time he finished, Demijohn stood stupefied, mouth open. All he could manage to gasp was, "I'll be doggoned!"

"Look, Demijohn." Sam spoke grimly. "Sheriff Ingersol's comin' up here to see you. He—"

"*Me?*"—with a start—"why me?"

"One o' Rance Crawford's rannies

claims as how he saw you ridin' with Skinny Jim an' Kerrigan 'fore they was killed."

Demijohn gaped. After a while, regaining his breath, he drew off his sombrero and rubbed a hand through his damp hair. "Holy cactus! He . . . he don't think *I* dry-gulched those hombres, does he?"

"Well, he's set on askin' a few questions, anyhow."

"Doggone it, I met up with Kerrigan an' Skinny Jim just by accident! Rode with 'em hardly a mile. Then we said *adios* an' parted!"

"Did you hear any shots after you left 'em?"

"Course not! If I had, I'd've hightailed back to investigate, wouldn't I?"

"So you don't know anything about them killings?"

"Not a doggone thing, Sam, so help me! Let the sheriff come if he's got a mind to. I got nothing to hide from him."

Sam scratched dubiously at his chin. Watching one of the dogs, he asked, "Another thing: After you left Kerrigan an' Skinny Jim, did you meet up with anybody else?"

"Nope."

"Didn't see anybody around, anywhere?"

"Nary a soul."

Nor could either Sheriff Ingersol or Len Foster, who arrived together just before sundown, elicit more information from Demijohn. The officials questioned him for an hour without result. Finally, disgruntled, they accepted Katherine Lenroot's invitation to stay for supper and rode back to Mesquite Flats in darkness.

When they had departed, Sam Squam went to his bunk, lay down, and yielded to speculation. He considered all that had happened in the past few days, tried to arrange the events in coherent sequence and to analyze them.

There was only one trouble. Time after time, the vision of Ruth Lenroot floated into his thoughts, obliterating everything else. It was incomprehensible, the way she haunted him. He had no definite thoughts about her, merely a hazy, dreamlike succession of memories of her face and eyes and voice. Sometimes he wondered how justified he was in remaining silent concerning the things he knew about her.

Once he rose impatiently. He made a cigarette and walked about the bunkhouse, restless, smoking. He had to get her out of his mind, he told himself. He had to concentrate on the killings!

That he had been on the right trail in questioning Hopi Painter, he now felt convinced. The question was: to whom had Hopi been giving or selling information about the lynching of Nevada Bill Lenroot? If he could discover with whom Hopi had been spending time in recent days.

Gene Dawson had been unable to supply the answer to that. "Couldn't say," Dawson had declared. "I'd take Hopi into town myself, mostly. But by the time he got home, nights, I was generally asleep. So was everybody else around here. An' Hopi never told who'd brought him home. We never bothered to ask him."

"Whoever it was," Sam reflected savagely, "he's got no more heart than a buzzard! He's a yeller-spined bushwhacker without enough guts to face men in the open! Everybody he killed was murdered from behind rocks or trees! Or in darkness, so's an hombre couldn't see him! It'll be a pleasure to see a polecat like that hang!"

Abruptly Sam checked the

thought. He stopped his pacings, and his countenance became pale.

A pleasure?

If the killer proved to be Ruth's brother Dave, hiding somewhere around Mesquite Flats, would it really be a pleasure to see him punished? Or more accurately, to see the effect of that punishment on Ruth?

A sense of squirming discomfort clutched at Sam's stomach. He crushed his cigarette, went to the door, and scowled up at a full, golden moon riding high in the Arizona skies. But he didn't see the moon. He was seeing Ruth Lenroot.

AFTER three days on the sheep ranch — by Tuesday — Sam's shoulder was in far better condition than he had dared hope. His left arm no longer hung in a sling, though there were still bandages around the wound itself. True, he couldn't lift the arm high, but he could use it well enough in simple tasks.

And on Tuesday he determined to return to Mesquite Flats. His primary purpose, of which he spoke to no one, was to see Ruth; to discuss with her certain strange ideas that had come to him in three days of meditation. Also, however, he was impatient to talk again with Ingersol and Foster, if only to learn what results their official investigations had achieved. He started out after supper.

"Don't figure there've been any more killings," he said to Mrs. Lenroot, as she rode with him toward the valley's exit. "We'd have been told if there were."

"I hope you're right!" she said. And then, "Please, Sam, stay out of trouble in Mesquite Flats!"

It was an overcast afternoon, heavy with late September heat and the threat of a thunderstorm. They walked the horses, and two dogs accompanied them. Presently, Mrs. Lenroot turned the conversation from their discussion of the murders.

"Sam," she said unexpectedly, frowning at the grass, "how would you like to be owner of this spread?"

He was so astonished that he jerked the palomino to a stop. Wide-eyed, he gaped at her.

"Ma'am?"

"I'm serious." Her voice was low. "I . . . I'm tired of it, Sam. And lonely. Lonelier than I've ever been in my life. What's the use of my running a sheep ranch? Fighting for it? Going through agony for it?"

"But, ma'am—"

"For whom am I doing it? Myself? I'd be happier up in Denver, with my people. And . . . and I have nobody to leave it to eventually. I've been thinking about it a lot. I'd like to sell it, Sam, and go home."

They were standing still now. He continued to stare at her. A dog rose and licked his hand, but he wasn't aware of it. After a long time he drew a deep breath.

"You mean, Mrs. Lenroot, you're offerin' the place to me?"

"At your own price, Sam. You know what it's worth."

"But, gosh, Mrs. Lenroot!" His voice threatened to become a stutter, so that he had to pause to steady it. "I . . . I ain't got enough saved to—"

"I know that, Sam. I wouldn't expect cash now. You can pay me off, year by year, as much as you can manage. I'm willing to leave all the details to you. You see," she raised her head and gave him a rather sad smile. "I figure you know this place. It's been home to you for years. I'd rather turn it over to you than to anybody else." She

hesitated. "You don't have to answer now. Just think it over a while. It's yours any time you want to buy it."

"Why, I—"

He stopped again, but this time it was not because of astonishment and confusion. The dogs had suddenly begun to bark.

They barked angrily, noisily; and as Sam blinked at them, they raced off toward the narrow mouth of the valley. Mrs. Lenroot snatched up her reins.

"Somebody headin' up this way!" Sam said. He touched rowels to the palomino, and they loped off together toward the valley's end. The dogs had vanished, but they were still barking.

WHEN they reached the point from which the long trail descended to the cattle country far below, Mrs. Lenroot gasped. Sam rose in his stirrups, his face going gray, his eyes fiery.

A long herd of cows—more than two hundred of them—was climbing the trail toward the valley!

In a swift, bewildered glance, Sam counted fifteen riders scattered about the cattle. Most of them were obscured by dust and distance. But the man who rode point, a scrawny, long-limbed figure, was clear enough.

"Slop Jeffers!" whispered Sam.

His heart began to thunder. It brought an echoing pulsation into his temples. This was Soapy Dolan's herd—*coming in September,*

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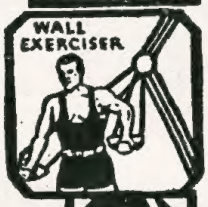

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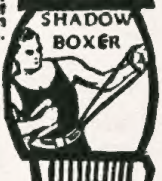

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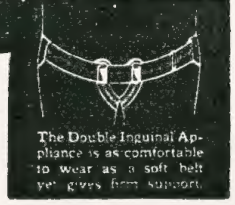

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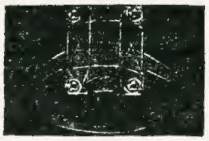

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instead of October!

Of Soapy Dolan, himself, Sam could see no sign. Yet here were fifteen men ready to push his herd across the sheep ranch; probably instructed to open a path with a shower of six-gun bullets!

Sam's hand snapped to his holster. His jaw became stony and his eyes snapped with rage.

"Mrs. Lenroot," he said, "you better ride back for Demijohn an' Abe! Tell 'em to come ready to fight. We got a man-sized battle on our hands!"

"Sam, you *can't!*" she gasped fearfully. "There's fifteen of them against just four of us!"

"Three of us," Sam corrected. "You're stayin' out of this fight! Go on, get Demijohn an' Abe!"

He swung out of his saddle, slapped his palomino away, and stood in the narrow entrance of the valley. His legs were spread, and his hand rested on the six-gun. Mrs. Lenroot stared at him in terror. He looked as if he'd have to be killed before he could be budged from that spot.

A helpless little cry died in her throat as she pivoted her horse and galloped off for Abe and Demijohn.

Down on the trail Slop Jeffers continued to lead two hundred Bar V Bar cows toward the valley. Grinning when he recognized Sam Squam far above, Slop lifted his six-gun in its holster experimentally, and let it slide down again. Another rider came to his side, a Mexican. The man nodded toward the valley.

"Looks like trouble."

"If they figure they can stop us," answered Slop, "let 'em try! We'll blast them clear out of Arizona!"

Can Sam and the other two Lenroot riders halt a cattle drive backed by fifteen men? Where is David Lenroot, and does he hold the key to the murder mystery? What did Hopi Painter try to tell Sam? Read the concluding installment of this absorbing range-country mystery in next week's issue.

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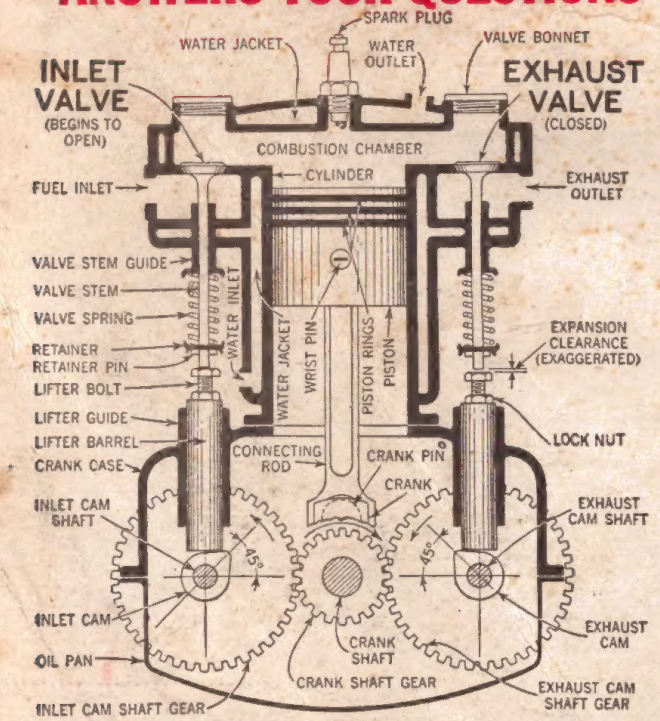

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